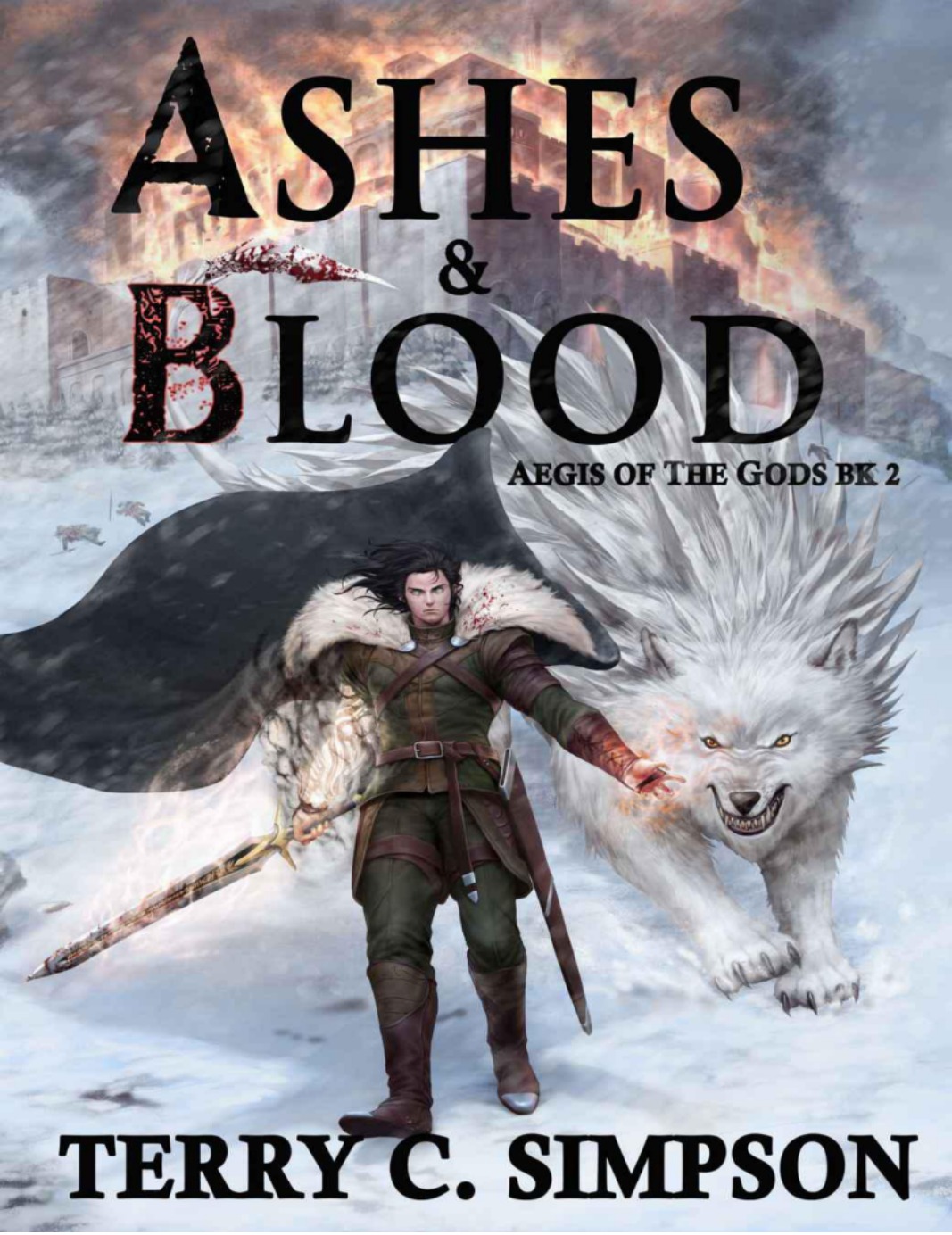
ASHES
&
BLOOD
AEGIS OF THE GODS BK 2
TERRY C. SIMPSON

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

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Terry C. Simpson

Ashes and Blood

Prelude to Ascension

Vast nothingness. That's how inside the chamber felt to her. If it even was a chamber. Thinking of it as such kept her sane. She saw no walls; neither could she make out a beginning or an end to the dark stretching in every direction. No sky. No horizon. The only breaks within the black monotony were from pools of torchlight so bleak they gave the impression they were dying. What she and the room's numerous occupants stood upon made her think of a bottomless pit. She shivered with the thought of what would soon breach the endless night.

A hum like a blade slicing the air resonated from the platform near where she stood. Similar noises mirrored it. Her heart hammered in her chest. The murmurs from the other patrons immediately ceased, cut off as if those honed edges severed their throats.

She recalled a time when hearing a portal's formation did not cause her to panic. A period when traversing from one point to another was as simple as a thought. Of late, even opening her own sent her insides crawling up her stomach. She clutched her gray robe for what would come next before slowly releasing its folds.

Showing fear will be my undoing. Showing fear, not fear itself, is a weakness. Fragility leads to death. She frowned, wondering where she had heard the saying.

The hums continued, each one faster than the next. Too many to count. Her heart outpaced them, beating so hard it felt as if it wanted to leap from her chest. She conjured images of an army shrouded by shade stepping from the portals.

Master your fear. You control it. It doesn't control you.

To find comfort she reminded herself that in reality creatures this powerful could not have crossed from the Nether. Not as yet. Or at least so she hoped.

You belong here. You were summoned for this meeting.

She inhaled deeply, seeking that part of her far inside where calm resided. When she found it, she *became* one of the summoned: composed, able to ignore the flutters in her gut, and the hums from the opening portals. Not realizing she had closed them, she opened her eyes.

The creatures arrived at the gathering within the featureless room as they always had. A slit etched the air from left to right, turned with slime's sluggishness, and opened into the shape of an eye positioned vertically.

Wreathed in oily smoke, many-faceted eyes reflecting the torchlight, tentacles blacker than midnight, they stepped through the

portals one after the other without so much as a thud of a footstep or clink of armor. Their eyes protruded on stalks. Each had at least eight horns on their head-quite a few more than any she encountered in the past. Chitin of ebon steel glistened where it covered their chests and the four disproportionate appendages they had for arms. Darkness caressed their legs and feet. Hundreds of their wriggling, eel-like minions appeared as if from nothing.

In all, there were nine of them, each at least twenty feet in height. Nine netherlings. *The Nine. Praise be to them.*

Despite the fact that her dream, that dreams in general, were supposed to have no physical effect on reality, she still cringed at their presence. However, the rule had no bearing on the miasma emanating from the Nine. It seemed real all the same. Death, decay, the perfume of fresh blooms, and the smell of wet earth after new rain, intertwined with the northern chill and the burning heat of the lava-filled chasms in the Broken Lands, making the air thick and palpable. She tasted sweetness and rot as each odor and sensation overrode the other for scant moments. With an extreme force of will, she suppressed the need to retch.

Packed to overflowing in the vast chamber, the folk called to the gathering shied away from the Nine. Although light and shadow shrouded the people's faces and made their forms near insubstantial, she knew they were rulers, nobles, merchants, teachers, philosophers, historians, soldiers, and even Denestia's poor. Everyone had representation tonight. She could not discern their expressions, but the gasps and whimpers told their own stories.

Many wore their sect's colors on their arms. White, Shadow, or Gray.

She almost spat on the umbra below her where there should have been a floor. Those in white or black were supposedly spies among the councils, but the thought, and worse yet, the sight of their colors, brought on a loathing she found difficult to contain. She calmed herself with the knowledge she had garnered this night by simply watching for telltale nuances. Each revelation made her lip twitch.

One male had a habit of stroking the corner of his mouth. A woman, whose robes clung to her every curve, sniffed at what had to be a scented cloth. Another female drew her hands to her hips as if attempting to grasp something, deflating every time she realized whatever it was did not sit there. The room's meager light reflected from one man's head, the sheen and his baldness causing her to assume he might be Banai. Knowing their religion, she might have been surprised to see one of their race numbered among those who served, but the Nine had proved long ago how far their influence stretched.

“The first is almost to the boy.” The netherling’s voice was as blank as her surroundings.

“The era draws nigh when the Annendin will come to judge all he created,” another intoned, each of its eight milky eyes looking in different directions.

“The gods die; the world remade; new gods ascend.”

As often as she’d attended these gatherings, she still found the singularity of their voices disconcerting.

“You have all done well to guide the world as needed for this to come to fruition.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd. The netherlings’ eyes turned toward the disturbance. Space cleared around a lone male, his clothing one of shadow. He stepped forward.

“You bring news, young one?”

She sucked in a breath. Only another netherling would dare approach as this man did, head held high and absolutely fearless. She frowned. *They hid themselves even among the common people?*

“Yes, masters. I have discovered a place between the worlds where Prima lives. An Entosis. It is beyond what we may have anticipated.”

“Nothing is outside our calculations, young one. Not even this Entosis.”

For the first time, she noticed a definite scoffing edge to the answer. The netherlings had always been implacable before, devoid of emotion. Agitation among them was worth remembering.

“Those who oppose us know of its existence,” the man said. “One of our own has been within its borders. It is he who sends warning.”

“Yes. We are aware. What you must understand is that the one we chose *unleashed* Prima into the world. The guardians are drawn to its power as they are to his. Allow the first to secure the boy and teach him to use his Gift. Without him, the unsealing cannot occur. His siblings are ready. He is the only one left.”

“Yes, masters.” The man bowed from the waist.

“The same goes for all of you. The young one must accomplish his purpose. See him safe until he does. Then, and only then, may you kill him and his mentors.”

Licking her lips with a measure of fear and anticipation, she woke from her dream to the familiar walls within the Iluminus. She had been a Listener for years. The time had finally come to act. The promise of a war to end all wars was coming to fruition.

Chapter 1

A glint. Nothing more. But he recognized metal when he saw it. They'd tried to hide the signs, but this was the place. Odd, their level of intelligence.

Cloak hanging limp from his shoulders, Ancel Dorn stopped where crimson tinged the white fluff near the trap. A drop here, a drop there, before they increased in regularity. The spots became spatters and then lines of red meandering to the distant tree line where snow dressed the forest in white as if preparing it for the long slumber. A satisfied smile twitched at the corner of his mouth.

The hunt always brought a certain sensation for him: a soothing calm to go along with the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. The promise of a kill, however, now that offered a different story and sang the opposite song. A song that sent a tingle through his body.

After another bout with nightmares that seemed all too real, dawn found him here in the Greenleaf Woods where winter's chill strengthened its grip. Although no gusts yet howled through the trees whose mostly skeletal limbs reached to the curdled sky, the temperature made him glad he'd chosen to don furs over his leather armor. Some leaves clung to life despite the hoarfrost enveloping their branches and trunks like icy mold. He listened, hoping for the telltale crunch of feet through snow, but he heard nothing. Neither the twitter of birds nor the forest animals' chatter. The air was expectant, an indrawn breath waiting for release or for the last gasp of death.

The imminent danger might have worried someone else, a person of lesser constitution, but not him. Better this, to hunt and to kill, basking in the thrill of stalking a deadly adversary, than to wake sweaty and fevered from the horrors of his dreams. The visions of the wall to his old home exploding, a man swathed in all black stepping through flames dragging Mother behind him by one arm. Nightmares of himself standing within a city he knew only from stories as he faced the wrath of the gods. From the ghastly images where he used his new power to kill friends and family, bringing the world to ruin.

Ancel grimaced with the memories, squeezing his eyes tight against the sudden pounding in his ears. After a few deep breaths, his racing heart eased. A breath of winter played against his face, bringing with it the crisp scents of the forest and the sharp odor of blood. He opened his eyes and bent to inspect the metallic glint the white drifts should have hidden. Carmine splotches, bits of grey fur, and flesh covered the jagged edges of iron teeth.

But there was no corpse. At least not that he could see.

Frozen red flecks, crushed grass, and brush, carved a path

through the snow. The trail led from the clearing out into the woods where weak light filtered through the trees but revealed little of the forest floor. Almost any mound or dappled shadow could hide the wolf.

Several dozen paw prints marred the lily-white fluff, headed in the same direction as the wounded animal. As he suspected, the beast wasn't alone. The gray wolves of the Kelvore Mountains weren't known to abandon their pack mates. Lately though, they took to the woods in greater numbers than he remembered. Wolves were creatures of habit; change did not come without a reason.

The remaining folk in Eldanhill blamed the beasts for the lack of game when there should have been plenty. It was almost as if the people preferred to deceive themselves than admit the truth. They went so far as to act as if the ancient protections still held, that the monsters of old could not cross into Granadia, despite the proof provided by the attack on their homes.

He entertained no such absurdity. The images of the dead rising to become monsters before soldiers struck them down and burned them were imprinted in his memory. He had his own idea as to the dearth of forest animals, but he kept it to himself. Dredging up the horrors of the past few months would not go over well with the survivors and the glut of refugees despite the existence of sufficient proof. Regardless, the presence of this many wolves played well into his goal.

A mournful howl, followed by another less than a mile away, confirmed his suspicions. No need to rush. The distance provided him with ample time.

Ancel pulled off his gloves and stuck them behind his sword belt. His skin had long lost summer's stain and now stood almost as pale as a typical Granadian. Almost, but not quite. How he'd not wondered about the difference in the past continued to baffle him. It wrote itself in his deep pinewood color as it flowed in his blood. Long ago, when he traveled to one of the towns or cities here in Sendeth, he should have realized he did not quite fit.

Brushing off the thought, he focused on the task before him. He took a cloth from his pocket, cleaned the trap, and then undid a water pouch at his hip. A twist and a pull opened the stopper and let out the scent of the oily deer blood mixture. This, he sprinkled onto the trap. It wouldn't quite overpower the smell of the wounded wolf, but another curious and desperate one would be along for sure. By now, the snow in the mountains drifted too deep, and the recent storm had driven much of their food down into the lower lying areas. Unfortunately, for the wolves, the reason most folk wore weapons, avoided the woods, and whispered amongst themselves, also made

short work of the game.

Out of habit, rather than actually feeling winter's bite, he drew his cloak around him and eased away from the trap, making sure to sprinkle his trail with deer blood. When he finished, he pulled his scarf up over his mouth, steam rising in warm wisps before disappearing.

Despite the cold, his mother would have liked the weather. Winter had always been her favorite time of year. "The quiet," she would say, "the beauty covers the land yet still reminds you it mustn't be taken lightly. Much like life itself."

Pain jarred his insides like a punch to the gut. He grasped at his chest where the pendant carved in the likeness of his mother's face hung from the chain around his neck, hidden underneath his furs and leathers. As he squeezed the metal, the hurt eased, once again forming a hollow, an emptiness he lacked the ability to fill.

Similar to the resonance from sword in the scabbard on his hip, the pendant's bond vibrated deep within him. The link gave him one of the few hopes he still clung to in earnest. The near indiscernible thrum from the piece, from the silver of the hair, and the golden tint of the gems in the eyes, beckoned to him. It offered a promise as slim as it felt. His mother was out there. Somewhere. Possibly still alive. He clung to that sliver of faith.

Two other hopes, more like reassurances, were his sword and the intricate tattoo-like artwork on his right arm that spread to his chest on the same side. His Etchings. The 'gift' bestowed upon him by the netherling. What those two promised him was quite different.

They oozed power that spoke of a reckoning on his enemies when he mastered them both. From time to time, the Etchings still ached. Not as much as when he first gained them, or as bad as the pain in his heart when he thought about his mother, but the hurt reeked of his failure as much and more as the stink of death. He squeezed his eyes shut against the rush of emotions. Against the rage, disappointment, and grief. Not that it helped much, but he still had to try before they overwhelmed him. There the pain was now, stabbing him like tiny daggers in his chest.

With agony came his doubts. *What if Shin Galiana is right about me, about my power? What if I'm destined to become an Eztezian Guardian? Is their fate to be mine also? Expected to protect but instead decimating all before me.* His father often said life waited for no man, and destiny was nothing more than one bold enough to take his future and shape it. Suppose those words were only wishful thinking, simple encouragement?

Ancel tried in vain to calm the tremulous flutter of his heart as he considered the possibilities. Too often of late, the burden of recent

events threatened to drown him. Not many things helped subdue the current flood. He reveled in those that did. Two were before him.

Hunting and killing.

Da didn't approve of his choice or his venturing into the forest alone, but at times like this, he didn't care. He needed to soothe himself in a fashion that would not force him to use his power.

Since Mother's taking, his desperation to find the black-armored man drove him. The dreams and memories from that night sparked a battle within himself not to lash out. The worst part was lacking the knowledge to begin his search. He hoped the answers came with the 'teacher' the netherling claimed would arrive.

Underneath the knotted mass of emotions lurked something stronger. It fluttered in his gut whenever he relived the night he lost Mother. Since then, he'd filled the vaults of his mind with revenge and rescue. But could he really master his gift and defeat the man in black? Or was she already dead and what he felt from her charm no more than residue, a lingering memory? Worse yet, what if she was alive, and he failed to free her?

Body trembling, Ancel clenched his fist. Open then close. Open then close. When he finally stopped shaking, and the fear subsided a little, he opened his eyes and took in the snow around him and the peeking grass that failed to succumb to winter's stranglehold.

I will prevail.

The forced sense of calm made him acutely aware of his third link. The one to his supposed mentor. He was certain he sensed the being somewhere to the south, faint and tremulous, but not as distant as before. Ancel brushed his fur vest as if he could touch that bond. It lived inside him much like the weaker one from his mother's charm or the one that blared from his sword.

However, unlike those two latter bonds, this link kept changing. It began as a tiny, inconsequential itch just beneath the surface of his Etchings, but over the past months, it had grown to an ever-present lump in the back of his mind. In fact, at times, the connection to his so-called teacher bloomed as if the unknown man or creature was well within reach. Once, he tried to escape from the pull, going high up into the Kelvore Mountains. But his location made little difference.

On several occasions he thought he sensed other similar points, but when he tried to focus on them, they disappeared. As time went on he'd dismissed them as part of his overactive imagination. Now, he resigned himself to waiting. And of course killing wolves.

A howl broke him from his thoughts, reminding him there was work to do, death to embrace. He brought two fingers up under his scarf into his mouth and whistled. The sound cut through the silence.

A sharp bark that ended with a roar answered his whistle.

Ancel broke into a jog. Boots crunching with each step, he headed toward where the bloody trail entered the Greenleaf Forest.

Moments later, a shaggy, gray-white form bounded from among the trees. Charra had grown quickly over the past months, much faster than any other daggerpaw. Much bigger too. He now stood a good eighteen hands tall at the shoulders, larger than the average horse. From across the way, his eyes shone like golden torches. In a soft mane down his back and sides, Charra's bone hackles spread even wider now. When they hardened, they stood erect, some of them more than a foot in length with edges as sharp as a honed blade.

According to the netherling, Charra was one of their kind. Ancel still found that difficult to believe. He'd discovered the daggerpaw wounded and bleeding in the Greenleaf Forest near his old home at the winery when the animal was a pup. Despite his father's reservations, Ancel nursed him back to health, and they remained together ever since. Whenever he saw his pet, he couldn't help but doubt the netherling's words. It would take more than atypical size or intelligence to convince him Charra was actually a multi-tentacled, gigantic black creature with chitinous armor, dozens of eyes, and snake-like minions.

Ancel drew up short a foot before his daggerpaw. "You go northeast. Get ahead of them and cut them off. I'll take care of the wounded one while you occupy the others."

Charra whined his assent and loped off into the shadowy forest, ice and snow soundless under his padded paws.

One foot tapping time on the frozen ground, Ancel waited for the high-pitched growl that would announce Charra's readiness. He checked and rechecked to make certain his sword was secure in its scabbard. Not that he needed to. The link to it provided a constant reminder, but some habits were hard to shake. He considered removing the short bow from over his back but changed his mind. The bow was perfectly fine. He'd oiled the string that morning. The arrows jutting above his shoulder from the quiver on his back were in prime condition.

So, he waited.

And waited.

He frowned. *Surely, Charra should have located the wolves by now?*

Still nothing. Under his scarf, he scratched at his stubble as he pondered the delay.

A low growl, followed by another deeper rumble, stilled his hand in the act of scratching. The noise set the hair on the back of his neck on end. A pungent odor, much like a dog kennel, wafted to him.

Not from the east. West.

Ancel's heart skipped a beat. Battle energy edged up through his

body in faint ripples. He took a deep breath and turned ever so slowly toward the growl.

Heads down, eyes trained on him, fur bristling, five wolves stalked at the edge of the woods. As expected this time of year, their coats had grown extra thick, making them appear even bigger than usual. They advanced, jaws spread in snarls, white teeth bared. One step. Pause. Another step. Pause.

If he backed up at all, the wolves would charge. Ancel allowed his breath to ease from his mouth, mist curling up as he let his body go limp. Either way they were going to attack. The option left to him was to strike first. He snatched for his bow.

Snarls accompanied the wolves as they bounded forward in response to the sudden move.

A flood of battle energy surged within Ancel. Eyes riveted on the charging beasts, bow held before him, he reached up over his shoulder. He plucked an arrow from the quiver and nocked it all in one smooth motion.

Less than forty feet separated him from the wolves. Heartbeats before they would be upon him. Despite the knot forming in his stomach and the thump in his chest, he delved deep into his mind with practiced efficiency. He found the calm of the Eye and sunk inside. His emotions skittered outside, trying to worm their way in. Right now, he needed none of them. All he wanted was emptiness. The cold-hearted indifference of one who stared down death without flinching.

Twenty feet.

Without thought, he aimed and loosed.

A yowl echoed.

One wolf staggered. The others came on faster, galloping.

Arrow. Nock. Loose.

Another painful cry.

This time a wolf fell.

Arrow. Nock.

They pounced.

Ancel leaped to the side, hitting the ground and brush in a roll, ignoring the pain of the quiver digging into his back as he crushed icy leaves beneath him. He dropped his bow in the process, and when he came to his feet, he already had his sword brandished.

The wolves skidded to a halt. One of the animals he'd shot was limping, a whine escaping its mouth with every breath, an arrow in its side. The other lay motionless.

Snapping and snarling at each other, the wolves spread apart. They surrounded him, mouths to the ground, jaws leaking slobber.

Ancel spun in a futile attempt to keep his eyes on each one. Every

time he turned away from a wolf, he needed to spin to cover his rear as he heard another beast charge. But each movement was a feint. They were measuring him for an opening, their reactions more human than animal.

Where in Hydae is Charra?

The answer to his silent question appeared in a blur of gray-white from the forest's edge. Before the closest wolf turned, the daggerpaw's jaws closed on its neck. A yowl choked off as bone snapped. Charra threw the carcass aside.

Red oozed down Charra's fur and covered the knife sharp protrusions of his bone hackles. Too much blood for the one bite he'd inflicted. Neither had he speared the wolf before he attacked.

What-?

Growling, four more wolves tore from among the trees.

Ancel almost smiled. The wolves had set a trap for him all along. *More human than wolf indeed.*

Charra spun to the new the threat. Ancel took several steps back while he faced the other wolves on his side. With Charra providing protection to the rear, he stood a chance.

Breaths laboring heavily, the wounded wolf eased to the ground. One of the others whined. A bark answered from those Charra occupied. The wolf in front of Ancel loped over to its counterpart, sniffed, gave one plaintive moan then a growl like distant thunder.

Ancel's heart thumped at the sound.

With a sudden lurch, the wolf spun to face him and bounded forward. At the same time, snarls issued from behind him, followed by Charra's barking roar. Out of the corner of his eye, Ancel saw the other wolf on his flank lunge.

He met the first animal head on as it soared through the air. Sidestepping at the last moment, he sliced.

Silversteel met fur. Flesh parted. Blood spurted.

A whimper ensued as the beast dropped to the ground. Ancel was already turning to face the flanking one, throwing his cloak up for protection.

As the second wolf crashed into him, he tried to drop to one side and roll. Pain lanced up his arm. The wolf had its jaws locked on, and even through the fur-lined cloak, his pelts, and leather armor beneath, the crushing power of those canines bore down on him.

He hit the ground hard, the wolf atop him worrying at his arm. A snarl made Ancel glance up. Its fur matted with blood, the wounded wolf had risen to its feet and limped over, jaws spread in a rictus. Golden brown eyes stared into Ancel's own.

Ancel tried to bring his sword up, but it was trapped beneath him. An eternity passed between one heartbeat and the next. The wolf's

shoulder muscles bunched. A torrent of panic cut through him like an icy gust in a storm.

With desperation came the voices of his new power-the voices from his nightmares. The heartbeats stretched. The world stilled.

"What is ours is yours." It was the whisper of death yet somehow tantalizing.

The wolf kicked its legs as it sprang.

"Use us as you will." The goading speech of a fierce gale rushing by a mountain.

Canine jaws spread, fangs sharp and white.

"You must not die here." This voice was the gurgle of a brook before it became a river.

Other voices rose, beseeching, commanding, filling him with promises. They crowded his head, tried to consume his being. Some competed with each other.

Behind them all, he sensed a greater power still. It felt as if it spanned deeper and wider than the world.

Ancel's mouth dried. Fear so strong he tasted it made him cry out.

The wolf was completing its leap, eyes so close he picked out the pupils' patterns, open jaws so near, he felt the heat of its breath. Slobber struck his face.

Yelling at the top of his lungs, Ancel suffused himself within the Eye. The speakers cut off with a howl. In the same instant, he reached out for his power.

The wolf jerked, whined once, and then pitched over. An arrow jutted from its neck.

A second later, the one tearing at his arm gave a matching cry and fell dead. Blood spurted from a similar wound.

Stopped midway before he embraced his power, Ancel kicked the beast off him and rolled over. Less than fifteen feet away, his father controlled his horse between his legs. The hood of his fur jacket thrown back, Stefan held his oversized, black longbow in one hand. Stefan nocked another arrow and aimed toward Charra. Ancel's gaze followed his father's aim.

Four dead wolves lay in the snow, but five more had joined the fray. Blood covered Charra's bone hackles in dripping rivulets.

The bowstring twanged; another wolf fell. The others turned tail and darted toward the woods.

Heart still racing, his breathing labored, Ancel scrambled to his feet, his sword held out before him.

"In Ilumni's name, didn't I warn you about coming in here alone?" Stefan bellowed, bow trained on the fleeing animals.

Ancel lowered his weapon as he turned to meet his father's furious glare. "Yes, Da." He tried to make his voice as meek as

possible.

"So why are you here? You could have died today, boy."

That last irked Ancel. "I'm not a boy any-"

"When you act like this … you are. Have you learned nothing?"

"Da, it's just-"

"There's no excuse for foolishness, for unnecessary risks, or for taking out your anger on the wildlife. Hunting for fur or food is one thing, but wanton killing is another."

Ancel hunched his shoulders and averted his eyes from his father's stony gaze. "I–I'm sorry." He sheathed his sword.

"Son, you could have gotten yourself killed." Stefan's voice became tender. "You're more important than ever."

"I know, but I'm so tired of waiting."

"Patience and perseverance go hand in hand for any task to be completed," his father said, quoting *the Disciplines*. "Restraint. Try to remember that when you feel the way you do."

"Yes, Da."

At that precise moment, Charra gave a warning growl, a throaty rumble deep and long. The daggerpaw stared off into the trees.

Ancel began to turn when a presence in his mind drowned his every thought. The lump of his third bond had grown incrementally ever since he received his first Etching, but now it felt as if it would explode. He squeezed his eyes closed and brought a hand up to his temple. The throbbing pulled him toward the direction in which Charra faced.

"Dear gods, what is that?" Stefan murmured, voice shaky.

Ancel opened his eyes. His father had his bow drawn, the feathery fletching of the arrow to his ear. He was aiming toward the tree line.

There, among the shadows, lurked a man-shaped, hulking form, at least seven or eight feet in height.

Chapter 2

Galiana Calestis contemplated High Shin Jeremiah's words. Seated at a window in the Mystera, she looked out onto the forests and plains steeped in white north of Eldanhill. Where clouds once scuttled across the sky, they now hung in sooty clumps. She squinted, imagining she could see the peaks shrouded to the northeast and beyond them to the Everlast Mountains and the towers erected there. *The Sanctums of Shelter. Could those spires live up to their promise of sheltering the world? What if they aren't as powerful as we hope? Then, all your plots, sacrifices, and actions over the centuries will have been for nothing.*

Heat and a crackle rose from a nearby fireplace. Scented candles in glass holders around the well-furnished room carried sweet hints of jasmine. The hearth's warmth did little for the chill in her body. Like the seasons themselves, the world was in flux. Nothing in her ancient bones said the change was for the better.

The recent odd behavior from the Greenleaf's animals said as much; it wasn't a coincidence. She did not believe in coincidences. The animals' propensity for violence and Jillian's impending trip to Torandil were why she'd summoned the woman here as part of the meeting with Jerem.

Dressed in a scout's light leathers, Jillian sat with her back to the table facing the window through which Jerem stared. Jillian hadn't said a word as he'd relayed the news.

"Are you positive?" Although she knew what to expect, Galiana wished to hear another answer. One with promise. Misguided or not, hope was a virtue worth clinging to in times such as these and more so in those to come.

"Taeria does not lie. You must feel the shift in the world, how events have caught up to us too quickly." Jerem's gaze remained focused beyond the foggy glass.

The wispy web of his hair, the lines around his eyes, and the way his silver robes hung loose spoke of the same weakened state she experienced. Time eventually took its toll, even on them. She remembered when he was a younger man, spry, ready to leave his mark on the world, hair shiny obsidian. She wasn't sure if this was what he had intended. It certainly was not what she envisioned.

"How long do you think we have?" Galiana kept her voice low as if whispering would give the words a different meaning. Sometimes she wished making a change for the better could be as simple as uttering words.

He shrugged, his shoulders making little to no impression in the

robes. “Not long, I suppose. A Bloodline Affinity may be one of, if not *the* most difficult of Forges, but whether we believe someone mastered it or not, that man knew to take Thania. To me,” he touched his chest near his heart, “that is proof enough. It is only a matter of time before they come for Ancel. Besides, we could not hide him for much longer. Not after the way he announced himself to the world. If not for the protection offered by the Vallum and the Sanctums of Shelter, I am sure his actions would have drawn much more unwanted attention.”

Bloodline Affinity. Galiana mulled the words over, a chill running through her body. In her lifetime, she could think of no one who perfected the ability. It was similar in ways to the Forge the Pathfinders employed to trace the ancestral history of a Matus they hunted. By using blood from that family line, they had a chance to identify the other members. However, a strong enough Matti could negate the Pathfinders’ skill or make subtle, misleading changes. On the other hand, a perfected Affinity allowed the Forger to delve into a person’s mind, trace their roots, and supposedly, their possible future siblings. The power of the one under such a Forging was of no consequence. According to research, the Bloodline Affinity was infallible.

“Do you believe he is an Eztezian?” Galiana asked.

“I doubt it matters what we believe.”

“But do you?”

He faced her, the silver pools that were his eyes steady and unrelenting. “Yes.”

The knot in her stomach clenched tighter. “And the one … this Ryne that you mentioned, him also?”

“Yes.”

The tension eased somewhat, enough to allow her a steadying breath. “Ancel might stand a chance with this master to help him.”

Jerem gave her a skeptical look. “Against what took Thania? I doubt they will be enough.”

She cringed at his words. No Skadwaz, no matter how strong in Mater, could have beaten Thania. At least, she didn’t believe it possible. After all, like her, the Skadwaz were only another form of Matus, not an archdaemon, a netherling, or a god. Employed and enhanced by the shade, yes, but still, in all her time she had yet to encounter a Skadwaz stronger than an Exalted. This man had treated her and Thania’s combined power as no more than a trifle.

“Added to what manner of creature he is, there are the forces the Cardian Queen have mustered.” Jerem looked to the north again. “And what Taeria says awaits in Everland as well as the Skadwaz marshaling their armies from the Great Divide. Add all of that to the Matii the Iluminus possesses, and we will need more than one or two

Eztezians or even their entire contingent. We need a unified people. Even then, there is the other problem. How in all that is holy did the shadelings breach the Vallum of Light? Its wards worked fine against anything else trying to cross after Ancel released the power. So why did it fail in keeping them out? How is it that not one single Herald at the Bastions received any sign that the shade bypassed the wards?"

Galiana recalled the nightmares she had trying to find answers to the same questions. With all their resources, the Bastions to provide warning, the message maps and their near infinite range for communication, their own ability to Forge wards, the Heralds had not seen, heard, or sensed a single shadeling. Not one. The Heralds' failure had left cities ravaged by the creatures, the majority of the attacks at other Mysteras.

"I wouldn't place all the blame on the Heralds." Jillian clasped her hands in her lap. Her helm with its eagle's beak rested on the table next to her. The woman's eyes reminded Galiana of the birds. Dark and predatory.

"Not that I disagree," Galiana said, "but what makes you say that?"

"Something is amiss, maybe bigger than anyone suspects. Not seeing this threat doesn't sound much different from what my eagles experienced in the Greenleaf. They confirmed the animals are acting out of sorts, but I cannot find a reason. Any creature's mind I try to touch rejects me, especially the wolves." Jillian appeared lost in thought for a moment. "Their habits have been erratic, much as if they're afraid of something."

"And you believe shadelings are the cause?" Jerem asked.

"Honestly, I don't know. This is the first time my pets failed me. My suggestion is to bar anyone from entering the forest."

Galiana nodded her agreement. "With that being said, Jillian, I need you to escort the next convoy to Torandil."

Eyes growing steely as they often did when she was being stubborn, Jillian made a steeple of her fingers. "I'm much more use here with my eagles keeping an eye on the forest."

"No need. There's but a few months left before we abandon Eldanhill. I want you to ensure this next group reaches Torandil safely. We cannot have them falling into Giomar's hands, or whomever it is that now holds Randane. Neither can we have them taken by the Tribunal's armies. Also, both Jerem and I feel we need an older council member to take charge of our preparations in Torandil."

Jillian opened her mouth to speak, but Galiana cut her off. "There is no room for discussion in this."

For a brief moment, Jillian's eyes flashed, and then her jaw relaxed. "As you wish. If there's nothing else, I will join them now."

Galiana knew the reason for Jillian's wish to stay on. According to Jerem, the Tribunal had discussed the possibility of sending Irmina to Eldanhill. Denying Jillian a chance to see her niece wasn't her primary purpose, but Irmina would have enough hostility toward the Dorns without adding her aunt's volatility.

After taking a deep breath, Jillian clasped the chair's arms and pushed to her feet. She tucked her helm under her arm, bowed to Galiana first, then to Jerem, turned on her heels, and strode from the room.

"I still have my concerns about her." Jerem stroked the long threads of his beard while watching the door.

"She simply wants to protect what is left of her family."

"As do we all," answered the old man. "As do we all."

"Anyway," Galiana said, "how has the Tribunal taken the Heralds' failure?"

"Not well. The Assembly squabbled over their punishment. Some even suggested recalling them and stripping them of their ranks. Whispers around the Iluminus were that the Heralds suffered from the shade's corruption."

Galiana felt her eyebrows climb her forehead. "Not a good rumor to start."

"You can imagine how that went. The Tribunal tested the Bastions themselves since then, using captured shadelings. They sensed the creatures and any strong Forging just fine. In the end, they decided to send inquisitors to interview each Herald. They also stationed several cohorts at each Bastion in fear they could be taken."

"No wonder they've thrown such numbers at Randane. What of Calisto?" Galiana asked, frowning. She doubted they would react the same to Jerem's city.

"Treated the same. The nerve of them," he grumbled. "I wasn't even worthy of them asking permission. They informed me an inquisitor would be on the way on the same day he arrived."

Galiana could see how much the insult angered Jerem. "I would have said they are panicking, but Randane proves their actions might be necessary."

"Possibly, which is why I suggest we plan for the worst. I would say sitting in Eldanhill is a bad idea, but you have protection here that you can be certain of. Amuni's Children must act soon if they have shadeling armies across the Vallum other than the ones you defeated. The Tribunal siege on Randane also gives you time."

"I agree." As much as Galiana wanted to be gone from Eldanhill, Ancel kept reassuring her that his mentor was coming. She did not bother to ask how he knew. All that mattered was how soon his teacher would reach Eldanhill. "In the meantime, we have gathered as

many stragglers as we could and are training them. The response and the numbers have been good. One could almost think the gods are smiling on us. How has your own recruitment gone?"

"Well enough. Better than I hoped." Jerem grunted, a smile playing across his lips. The first one she had seen since he arrived. "They will certainly be a surprise for many."

The words provided some relief, however small. "Can we flee, take him there for safety?"

"Oh no, not yet. He must accomplish his first task and bring the Setian together. Some parts of the world may hate him for it, but it must be done." Jerem stared out the window. "He will need an army behind him. One unlike the world has ever seen."

"Still it might not be enough," she said under her breath.

"No, it might not." Jerem's voice was grim. "But at least he will give the people some belief, a place to turn. Despite what we have preached, there are no saviors, Galiana. The people, the world itself must carry the brunt of what is to come. All we can do is help in any way we can to lessen its impact."

Galiana couldn't help but hunch in on herself at such a prospect. "What if he is killed like all the others before him?" It pained her to ask, but she needed to hear these answers, feel what was at stake from another mouth. One she trusted.

"Then chances are we all die. And whoever remains standing will enslave those who survive."

Galiana pondered what Jerem said. This could not be the last chance. Out there, somewhere, someone else knew what was happening. Someone else was preparing a way to help Denestia. She had to believe that. If she did not, then her own hope would abandon her. "What word from the Iluminus?"

"Quintess has set things in motion. She and a trusted few."

"Then I guess it is time for us to see this to the end."

"Agreed," Jerem said, "but timing is delicate. Do not move until you are forced to do so."

Galiana nodded absently, her mind drifting off to consider how best to protect Ancel and what the future held if the world burned.

Chapter 3

The giant shape stepped into the light, the metallic glint of a sword in its hand.

Stefan's bowstring twanged.

"No!" Ancel reached a hand out to the arrow in desperation as if he could draw it back.

The arrow flew true. It pierced armor adorning an oak-trunk chest like a blade through silk. The most beautiful armor Ancel had ever seen.

The giant was a man. Tangled black hair hid his features, more akin to Charra's fur than a mustache and beard. The stranger's eyes widened at the shaft jutting from his chest. A massive hand rose to snap the wood in two before he pitched forward. He landed face down with a resounding thud and a shower of snow.

Stefan nocked another arrow, spurring his horse into a trot.

"Da. Stop." Frantic, Ancel ran toward the giant.

"Come back," Stefan yelled. "You don't know who or what he is."

"Yes, I do." Ancel continued his run without looking back but made sure to veer where he thought he could block the next arrow. "It's him. He's the one. I can feel him." He stopped over the man.

"What?" his father called from behind him.

"The link," Ancel stressed, trying to hide his excitement despite the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach at the sight of the giant. The bitter scent of the blood spattered amongst the bush and on the ground set his heart racing. More often than not, when his father shot, he did so to kill. Another odor emanated from the giant. Ancel cringed at the reek. The stranger stunk like death or worse, but the strength of the bond to him said he was alive. Barely. He glanced over his shoulder. "He's the one I'm linked to … my teacher …" A thrill ran through him when he uttered the word.

"Oh Ilumni." Stefan slung his bow over his back and swung down from his saddle.

Ancel resumed his inspection of the giant. Artwork in dizzying colors and vivid detail covered the back of the man's form-fitting leather armor. There were depictions of landscapes, battles, unknown beasts, weapons, celestial bodies, and words in scripts. Ancel could not begin to fathom any of it despite his extensive studies. The drawings flowed from the short-sleeves of the giant's chestpiece onto the skin of his muscular arms in one seamless design. Ancel sucked in a breath, gaze riveted on the artwork as he brushed the ones on his own right arm. These too were Etchings. He was sure of it.

"We need to get him off the arrow shaft," his father said, boots

crunching in the icy grass. Stefan hawked and spat. “In Ilumni’s name, he stinks.”

They worked in concert, trying to flip the huge man onto his back, but he was too heavy, his armor like chunks of ice. Even his massive rune-etched sword resisted their efforts to relinquish it from his grasp. With a whine, Charra trotted over. Head down, the daggerpaw pushed the body by the waist. Ancel placed himself near the thighs and Stefan at the chest. Together, they heaved and rolled the giant over.

An awful stench wafted from the man like stepping onto a corpse-laden field days after a battle. Body convulsing, Ancel retched, covering his mouth and nose at the same time.

Long scars marred the left side of the giant’s face. Discoloration seeped across the exposed portions of his skin. The parts of the man’s hands not covered in tattoos were a bluish black. So were his fingers where they gripped his sword’s hilt. A similar tint showed from his neck up. The areas not affected by frostbite were tanned a deeper brown than Stefan’s skin. His chest rose and fell, slow and uneven. A liquid gurgle escaped his lips. The arrow must have punctured a lung.

A sense of relief washed through Ancel at his father having missed the heart. He’d seen men survive an arrow to a lung, but he’d also seen some die.

“This work on the armor and skin …” Stefan said. A frown on his face, he circled the giant. “I’ve seen this before.”

“Well … yes, on me.”

“No, not yours. Even when I first saw your Etchings I thought they were familiar, but I couldn’t quite place them. Now, with these …” Stefan trailed off.

“Where? On who?”

“A long time ago, back in Seti. It was on a-never mind. We need to get him to Eldanhill immediately.”

Intrigued, Ancel opened his mouth to press the issue.

“Forget it. Now isn’t the time or place,” his father said.

Ancel snapped his mouth shut and nodded. He took a moment to consider the giant’s size and weight. “How are we going to move him?”

“We’ll build a large litter.”

As doubtful as he was, Ancel was willing to try, but he also had other concerns. “What about the wolves, Da?” Squinting, he peered into the woods. “They could return at any moment.”

“No, they won’t. They’ll regroup first, most likely find another pack to bring this way. We still have time if we hurry. Charra can stand guard. Let’s go.” Unsheathing his sword, Stefan headed into the trees.

Ancel followed, staying close, eyes scanning the shadows. The sun's glimmer showed higher in the sky, but the overcast conditions fought against its light. Among the woods, the hardier cedars were still green. Burnt-red oak leaves dotted branches covered in hoarfrost. Dead foliage peeked through piled snow. Ancel kept a wary eye on those mounds.

The sound of hacking drew his attention to where his father chopped at a sapling. After one more uneasy glance at the piled foliage, Ancel followed suit.

Time passed at a torturously slow pace as they worked. Bird song and the chatter of winter animals feathered the air. On occasion, Ancel stopped to mop his brow and take a sip from his other waterskin. When hunger gnawed at his belly, he chewed on pieces of dry rabbit and crusty bread. His scarf now rested around his neck, and although tempted, he resisted the urge to remove his cloak. Often, his father flicked a hand to his own forehead to wipe away perspiration. Between the two of them, they had a growing collection of branches from which to choose.

While they worked, Ancel kept an eye on the giant from time to time. Unlike before, he breathed evenly and slowly as if in a deep slumber. *How could someone be in his state of frostbite and still live? Where was the man from?* Men almost as large lived among the Nema and Seifer clans in the Kelvore Mountains, but like most northern Granadians, they were a paler skin tone. If the stories were true, the Sven and Harnan were as big, if not bigger, but the latter were in Ostania. Ancel pursed his lips. That might explain the giant's mahogany complexion.

The man's wound troubled him. Ever since he received his Etchings, his arm and chest in the same area were much stronger. Unbelievably so. He'd taken to testing it. One day, rather than use his sword, he raised his hand to block a blow while sparring with Mirza. He never told, but besides a slight sting, the strike, which should have broken a rib, hadn't done much. Later the same night, he took a knife and tried to scour the Etchings. Again the twinge, but not once did the blade pierce his skin. Then, today. The wolf's teeth should have pierced his fur and armor and crushed his arm but hadn't come close. *So how did Da's arrow go through armor and flesh covered in an Etching?*

"I think we have enough," his father said.

Ancel looked around, surprised to see how many saplings they'd cut down. A swath of clear forest occupied by larger trees and deep snow surrounded them. He put away his sword, grabbed a branch in each hand, and dragged them toward the clearing.

Morning grew into afternoon. His father left the branches to him while using rope from his saddlebags to tie the wood together near an

old stump. Stefan dug out a patch of snow into which he placed the litter angled up toward the tree's remains. Ancel was almost finished with the branches when the first howl echoed from the north.

"Hurry," his father implored.

Without a backward glance, Ancel dragged the last two pieces of wood to the clearing. He held them in place while his father secured them to the others.

Another howl. This time closer.

Charra grunted.

"Go. Protect us," Ancel ordered.

The daggerpaw, dried blood a dull brown against its fur and bone hackles, bounded off into the trees. Charra soon disappeared from view.

"Da," Ancel said.

"Yes," his father answered without glancing up from the litter.

"There's no way Charra holds them all off. We won't make it through the trees with this litter before they catch us."

Stefan nodded.

Ancel waited for more, but his father said nothing.

When Stefan finished, he stood. He walked over to the giant with a few pieces of rope he'd braided together and bent over the man.

Brows furrowed, Ancel watched.

His father worked the rope up the giant's arms and over his shoulders to form a type of harness. He brought his horse closer, looped the rope's ends over the animal's head and onto its shoulders, and then wrapped the remainder around the pommel. The mount's eyes rolled, and it snorted several times. Stefan guided the horse in the direction of the stump and gave it a light tap on the rump. The horse pulled, and the rope snapped taut. Muscles straining, the horse took one step forward, then another. The giant's body shifted an inch or two before it began to slide toward the litter.

A few more paces and the horse dragged the unconscious man up onto the makeshift contraption. Stefan stopped his mount, untied the ropes, and used them to secure the giant to the wood. Then he looped the remaining loose ends around the strongest saplings. He directed his horse to one side to drag the litter away from the stump. When the entire process was completed, he nodded in satisfaction.

The first yowls, snarls, grunting barks and growls of daggerpaw fighting wolf echoed through the gloomy trees.

Stefan strode over to where he'd left his bow and picked it up. "I'll send Charra to you to help clear a path."

Ancel shook his head, his words easing out in a disbelieving whisper, "No, you mustn't."

"Yes, I must and I will."

“Da, there’s no way you can hold them off. Please, don’t do this.”

“Alone, I probably wouldn’t be able to, but we’ll do our best.” He nodded toward the south, the direction of Eldanhill.

There, appearing from the tree line like a spirit dressed in the dark-colored britches and tunic she favored, a short cloak whipping around her, jogged Kachien. Two sheaths stood out on her hips, each containing a black-handled dagger.

“How?”

“I told her if we weren’t back by noon to come find us.”

“Why not Shin Galiana?”

“She had more pressing issues with the possibility of Pathfinders coming to Eldanhill since we declared ourselves.”

Ancel cringed with the thought of the men and women tasked with capturing those who Forged without the proper control, used Mater to commit crimes, or stood against the Tribunal. Not only was he guilty of the first and the last but so was much of Eldanhill. To the Pathfinders, they’d also done the second.

In the distance, the fight between Charra and the wolves grew more pronounced. A howl resonated to the northeast. A different wolf pack.

“There’s no time to waste,” Stefan commanded. “Mount up.”

After a slight hesitation and a pained look to both his father and the woman he’d grown to love, who he still cared for to a great extent, Ancel climbed atop Stefan’s horse.

“Don’t stop. Don’t look back until you reach Eldanhill.”

As his father was saying those words, Kachien drew even with them. Ancel opened his mouth to acknowledge her at the same time that she glanced down at the giant. She sniffed, rubbing a thumb across her nose. Then her head jutted forward a bit, her eyes narrowed, and her hands slid imperceptibly closer to the handles of her daggers.

Before Ancel contemplated her reaction, his father slapped the rump of his mount and sent him on his way.

Chapter 4

Head held high in defiance, Irmina Nagel regarded the Tribunal Assembly's members arrayed before her. Tiered alabaster steps formed a semicircle like an amphitheater of old. Spaced along every stone stair were chairs of the finest mahogany behind matching balustrades. Upon each chair sat the Tribunal High Seats, the twelve colored stripes on their sleeves unmistakable.

Depicted on the walls behind them was Denestia's creation by the Annendin, taking his lifeblood to produce Mater. He separated it into the three elements and made the worlds. He further broke down the elements into the essences and bestowed them onto the gods. Other murals showed the gods passing their essences down to the Eztezians. Mixed in were the wars with the netherlings, the shadelings, and men with black boiling from their bodies-supposedly, the Skadwaz after the god Amuni changed them. Thinking back to Ryne's story of the man he faced near the Vallum of Light and their battle in Castere's Keep, she averted her eyes from that specific section.

Directly ahead of her, on a seat positioned higher than the others, sat High Jin Quintess, leader of the Raijin. Wiry and imperious, auburn hair cut short, she regarded Irmina with cold, golden eyes. To Quintess' right sat High Shin Hardan, the Pathfinder overseer, silver robes matching his hair. While he studied her, he stroked the corner of his mouth with his thumb. A habit she still found as disconcerting as his piercing eyes. As usual, his expression reflected little to no emotion.

In positions sloping down from the center, according to importance, were High Shin Neftana, sniffing at a perfumed cloth, mouth upturned as if something reeked; High Shin Cantor, black skin shiny against his whiter robe; and High Shin Berenil, his complexion the opposite of Cantor's. Each led the factions pertaining to an element of Mater-the Streams being foremost, followed by the Forms, and finally the Flows.

Nine other Tribunal members, including High Shin belonging to various divisions, were seated according to the essences they represented. Sigils and colors on display, their expressions were serene though some had revealed pride at Irmina's success in Castere. The victory had gained them another foothold in Ostania. Quintess and Hardan however, showed no such pride. Quintess' line of questioning had been particularly scathing.

She grimaced as she regarded the one High Shin in the inky black robes of shade. Though Streamean worship taught equality among the religions, the same way the Tenets governing the elements spoke of

harmony, she believed any representation of the shade was blasphemy, even if the color was required. The world suffered enough by those who worshipped its chaos. There were those who would argue that light was to shade as order was to chaos-one could not exist without the other; the world required balance-but she did not care. When questioned, Shins made it seem as if the shade's representation was of no consequence, a mere symbol in respect to teachings passed down through time immemorial.

Irmina knew better.

Some within the Iluminus worshipped Amuni and his shade. As weak as they were, the Shadow Council existed, as did the Gray who claimed to remain neutral. The White Council opposed them with its dedication to Ilumni, Bragni, and Rituni, the three most pious gods. And yet, not even their subservience to the light was allowed to appear as if it dominated. Unless of course, one wanted to forget that almost everyone within the Iluminus gave their praises to Ilumni. Irmina smiled at the thought. Such a fine distinction to show whom the Ashishin really served.

Irmina wondered who belonged to which sect. Jerem had made it clear that of the three, the Grays might be trustworthy, and then only to a certain degree. She shook her head. The man found conspiracies in seemingly inconsequential acts.

In her simple blue tunic and trousers, the situation reminded her of a senjin player in Ishtar's renowned arenas before an announcer prepared to declare the sport's results. In her case, the High Shin represented the judges who determined the subsequent reward for the victor and punishment for the vanquished. Depending on the circumstances, the sentence could be death.

"So," High Jin Quintess said, "you believe killing a king was the right thing to do?"

"I was under orders from High Shin Jerem," Irmina answered.

Murmurs spread through the gathered elders. Qunintess raised a hand and the whispers died.

"As much as High Shin Jerem is a senior member of the Tribunal, he overstepped his bounds in this case," Quintess said, voice calm, but her eyes burning with anger. "We were not prepared, nor do we condone his actions."

"But-"

"Think, Shin Irmina." Quintess cut her off, using her title as a reminder of her proper place. "You have been on enough missions now to realize you have placed us in an almost untenable situation. Already, many of the other kingdoms have fled not only Castere, but Astoca as a whole, retreating to their own countries and consolidating their positions not only against the remnants of the shade's armies,

but against us also."

"I was under the impression the Tribunal always wanted to gain a stronger hold in Ostania, Jin Quintess."

"Ashishin Irmina," Quintess paused, "it is Ashishin Irmina Nagel, isn't it?"

As tempted as she was to say she knew her name only too well, she bit her tongue and nodded.

"Do not forget to whom you speak. Last I checked, you are not on this Assembly, and therefore would not begin to know what our intentions might be."

Irmina nodded again. "Yes, High Jin. Please accept my humblest apologies." She said the words with as straight a face as she could mange.

"Good. Now, let us play along with your scenario, shall we? For over a thousand years, we have subtly influenced the Ostanians with our Devout priests." The strain of trying to remain neutral echoed in Quintess' voice. "On the other hand, when conflicts arise, Ashishin such as yourself act as mediator for some. For any other … shall we say … more direct deeds, we call on our Raijin. Now, at a time when we have influence among ranking nobility, despite the resistance and whisperings of some concerning what our intentions may be, we lead an attack on the most prominent Ostanian city for all to see. A city, I might add, whose rulers have resisted almost every overture from us. That is, until recently, when they finally requested our help against a common foe."

"Exactly," Irmina protested, "a common foe. We saved not only them but a few other Ostanian cities from armies of Amuni's Children and shadelings."

Quintess tapped a finger on the desktop in front of her. "In truth, that is what happened, but sometimes events are not portrayed truthfully, but are painted with a delicate brush by those who would benefit."

Irmina frowned. *What in Ilumni's name was the High Jin referring to?* No one who witnessed what occurred in Castere could deny the wickedness they'd defeated, the devastation they'd prevented. Or could they?

"By your expression, you begin to understand. From what we gathered, a certain Lieutenant Rosival, once King Voliny's right hand, was quite a bit more … shall we say adept … at taking advantage of the situation we created. In fact, what he did was no less short of genius. He employed the same tactics we have for years, using rumors spread throughout Ostania and fear that dates back to even before the War of Remnants."

Irmina squinted, trying harder to understand how Rosival could

turn the slaughter by the shade and its invasion into an advantage.

Quintess continued, her tone sober, as if she spoke to a child, "You see, Shin Irmina, the local Ostanian populace are as much affected by myth as anyone else. For years, the impression that we lay with the shade and employ shadelings has spread among them. Can we rightfully deny it?"

For a moment, Irmina considered answering with a yes, despite knowing the contrary. She glanced toward the High Shin representing the Streams' essences. Light, heat, cold … and shade. She thought of the Devout priests' jobs, spreading Steamean worship and its values of equality and balance even among the religions and their individual gods. A smart enough man could easily spin that into something more sinister.

She understood clearly now. Rosival had whispered the right words to the right ears to paint a picture that the Tribunal's own minions had attacked Astoca. The Tribunal's reason? To gain control of another swath of land similar to the one they held in Felan. For those who witnessed the battle at Castere, he'd kill the ones unwilling to be a part of his conspiracy. As far as the others? Men will betray much for the promise of titles and riches. With the Tribunal preferring to be tentative, even secretive about their true intentions, and with an impending revolt from Astoca coupled with a chance of war against the Cardians, the Harnan, the Banai, as well as the imminent threat of Amuni's Children and their armies, that left the Tribunal no choice but to relinquish their hold on the city.

Despite those who would acknowledge the Tribunal's rightful allegiances, the recent events in Eldanhill and several other territories further compounded matters. The Setian, hated by all in Ostania since the days of the Shadowbearer War, had declared their existence here in Granadia. She imagined the rest of the world's shock at such a revelation. Not only did the Tribunal harbor an enemy, one who had decimated much of Ostania, they had seen to their well-being. What could be worse? The Setain war machine, led by Nerian, had ground entire cities to dust. They spared no one. Although the dregs from the wars still lived, they were considered so vile that peoples across the world refused to name those survivors as Setian. They were Amuni's Children, monsters, inhuman, creatures akin to shadelings, poisoned by their worship of the shade and its god, Amuni.

And the Tribunal had saved them. *Simply brilliant.*

Deception after deception, inject enough truth where necessary. The Tribunal had been tinkering with men's lives for years in the same fashion.

Irmina couldn't help the slight twitch of her lips. She was beaten even before this inquisition began. They could easily lay the blame for

it on her shoulders. Even if she claimed Jerem's involvement, he himself was not present when they killed Voliny. He probably would not deny what happened, but as a Raijin in training, she was technically the commander of the Tribunal's Matii. Sure, there was Knight Commander Varick, but she was certain his centuries of service would absolve the man of any wrongdoing. Which left her. Irmina felt her shoulders slump.

"High Jin Quintess," Irmina said, meeting the woman's unflinching gaze. "What would you have of me?"

A slow smile spread across the High Raijin's face.

"If you say I made the right decision, then why do I feel like shit?" Irmina asked as she tried her best not to snap at High Shin Jerem.

Gasps issued along the hallway from several students in the blue robes bearing the incomplete figure eight insignia of novices. A few others, in various shades, glanced over, some muttering amongst themselves, adding to the susurrus of voices. Irmina ignored their reactions as she trudged through the Iluminus' pillared walkways with Jerem at her side. The shining walls and vibrant colors on the windows surrounding her were supposed to evoke certainty, a reflection of positivity through light. They failed miserably.

Jerem, his withered, skinny arms clasped behind his back, arched a wispy eyebrow.

"I–I'm sorry." Irmina shook her head.

"You should be."

"No need to rub it in."

"As for the way you feel," Jerem shrugged, the crimson robes about his shoulders moving slightly, "you are supposed to feel that way. It is the point of the Raijin exam. Find a person's weakness and use it against them. See how they react, judge their control. One of the reasons they make aspiring Raijin wear those ridiculous outfits, by the way." A slight smile graced his thin lips.

Irmina cringed at the thought of the kilt that covered so little she might as well have been naked. The top had exposed her ample cleavage, and the bottom left little to the imagination. Only through great effort did she manage not to gut some ogling ruffian or drunk. Thank the gods she now wore the plain blue tunic and trousers. Dressed as she was did bring a raised brow here or there, but not the lusty looks and comments of her old garb. "Ability to act logically when faced with an extreme situation," Irmina quoted.

"For the most part, yes."

"Really? There wasn't much sense in what I did," she argued, thinking back to her choice. "If Ryne is truly who Voliny said, how

does not killing him when he was weak make for a correct decision?"

"Everything is not in black and white, light or shade, truth or lie. There are myriads of grays to consider, plenty of dimness, many a half-truth and more. All helping to bring about what we are and strive to be."

Resisting the urge to snort, Irmina said, "Similar to how you're talking now?"

Jerem's lips twitched. "Precisely."

"You mentioned more. What else could there be?"

High Shin Jerem stopped.

Drawing her brows together, Irmina glanced around to see if some inattentive pupil had crossed their path, but they all maintained a wide berth. Every student gave a quick nod of deference first to Jerem then to her as they hurried by, eager to be at their classes. When she returned her attention to her mentor, Jerem's white eyebrow, so similar to the pure snow falling like puffy ash outside the Iluminus' windows, was raised again.

Her forehead furrowed even more. She expected him to say she knew the answer to her own question. The ensuing silence as they resumed their walk confirmed her suspicion. She followed, this time a step behind, face flushed like a scolded schoolgirl back when she first met the tall, waif of a man whose youthful effervescence belied his stature. Mind working furiously, she bit her lip, pondering why she'd been given the particular test of facing her most hated enemy and having to choose between assisting him or driving her sword through his back when given the opportunity.

A sudden smile bloomed across her face. "Control. Everything it means to be any type of Matii hinges on emotional control."

High Shin Jerem grunted.

"They risked my life … no … you risked my life to see if I could control myself? You gave me the chance to relieve myself of all the daemons haunting my dreams only to snatch it away from me?" This time, she was the one who stopped and stared at the High Shin.

"I never deprived you of anything." He kept on walking. "You accomplished that yourself."

Irmina's hand clenched against her side. Remembering her words from a moment ago, she sought the deep place within her mind where she walled herself away from her emotions while they flitted outside. The Eye brought her comfort, but her rage still existed, buzzing like a nattering fly beyond its surface. With an exaggerated breath, she stalked after Jerem.

She caught up with him as he turned down another hall past several columns. Guards stood at attention, tasseled lances held before them. On the breast of every surcoat shone an emblem of the sun with

three lightning bolts striking in front of it. The Lightstorm insignia appeared brighter against their silver armor. Unlike the main thoroughfare, no windows lined this hall that led deeper into the Iluminus. No one traveling down this walkway wore the colors of students and apprentices or even the paler red with gold sleeves of Ashishin. The few people walking this way displayed the bright crimson, silver, gold, and stripes of High Ashishin.

"Good for you to maintain control even now," Jerem finally said. "You will need it."

Another test. She almost groaned.

Similar to the walls along other corridors, the ones here shone, imbued with light essences that kept the Iluminus in perpetual brilliance and chased away any possibility of a shadow. Even the floor and ceiling glowed. Tapestries and paintings lined the walls, displaying various battles. Some were actual recounts, others, stuff of legend.

A series of paintings depicted the Tribunal's history, dating back several millennia. They showed the first among the Exalted: Trucida Adler, Jenoah Amalie, Sol Remus, Damal Adelfried, and others. Men and women all said to be related to the Eztezians-the direct descendants of the gods themselves given the task to protect the world. Damal, in particular, was displayed larger than life, a giant to rival Ryne's size, if not larger. The man reminded her of the brief glimpse she'd gotten of some sort of spiritual presence back when Ryne defeated Voliny.

The same drawing showed them bowing before a form wreathed in light-a representation of Ilumni-as they received the Principles governing the elements of Mater and the Tenets for each individual essence. The script beneath said Ilumni also handed them the ideas behind the foundation of Streamean worship: the triple unity. The coming together of the gods, the three religions, and of man.

The writing continued to wax poetic about justice, social understanding, the belief in nonviolence, and compulsory education. Above all, it stressed the founding ideals of the harmonies of life. Do good and so would fortune shine on a person. Do evil and reap the rewards of darkness.

The last tapestry showed the creation of the gods themselves by the Annendin-the One God. He was a void, nothingness, black, and foreboding. Below the tapestry, written on the actual walls, were the Tenets and Principles of Mater.

Irmina pressed her lips into a tight line. Moments ago, Jerem mentioned how the concepts of good or evil were a matter of interpretation mired in a convoluted middle ground. How literally did a person take 'reaping the rewards of darkness' anyway? From

experience, enough believed those rewards worth the sacrifice.

The High Shin clearing his throat broke her from her thoughts. “Be careful however you answer them. They will try to lead you.”

Irmina nodded. For the first time, images of whom or what she thought the Exalted looked like flashed through her mind. She had never met them before, but rumors abounded during her training all the way to her promotion from Pupa to Ashishin and her subsequent application to become a Raijin. For any Matus to rise above the rank of Ashishin they needed to visit the Exalted. As the Tribunal’s rulers, they reserved final say on any ascension after an interview. Some of those rumors said on occasion, a Matus presented before them did not return from the chambers and were not heard from or seen again. The thought made her shiver.

Her meeting today was two-fold. One was her interview to advance to Raijin, and completing whatever additional test they required of her within the confines of their quarters. The other was to be questioned about Ryne. Somehow, despite all Jerem’s precautions, the Exalted had discovered her original mission. Their summons left no room for maneuvering. Although she was certain their stance on the part she played in Castere would be a reflection of the Tribunal Assembly, that did not worry her as much as if they knew she kept Ryne’s identity a secret.

She drew in a slow breath, taking in the cleanliness of the halls and the perfumed scents from incense set into small braziers near the walls. “Should I lie?”

Jerem raised his brow again, this time sweeping a thin wisp of matching hair from across his other eye. “Even if I wanted you to, you do not possess the necessary skill for such an endeavor. They would see right through you.”

“So what shall I tell them?”

“All you know about Ryne. Answer their questions truthfully.”

“Won’t that implicate you-” she cut off her whisper as another High Shin, at least eight multicolored stripes adorning his silver sleeves, strode by. The man bowed slightly to Jerem, whose own robes bore several more stripes than his counterpart’s.

“Take a moment to think about exactly what you know.”

Irmina mulled over the events in her head, starting with Jerem training her to become an Ashishin assassin, to her discovery of the Dorns being responsible for her parents’ deaths. She considered the task Jerem set her before she could seek revenge, which led to Ryne and his companion, Sakari. She breathed deep as she remembered Sakari’s color-shifting eyes and his ability to use a skill similar to her beast-taming to delve into her mind. Not to mention the black creature with its many tentacles he’d transformed into when she killed

him.

She dredged up every tidbit she could, including Taeria's revelations and the knowledge imparted by Herald Bodo. Not even her discovery of Setian living on this side of the Vallum of Light revealed much about Jerem, although it did shed light on Ryne's history.

In the final battle in Castere, Voliny revealed Ryne's many incarnations. Lives of legends and myths. He himself was Nerian the Shadowbearer, the Setian king and a leader among the shade-the one who had issued the commands that began the demise of much of Ostania and her family.

She squeezed her eyes tight at the thought. With the chance before her, instead of killing Ryne, she'd destroyed Sakari. An act she still did not fully comprehend.

Why kill Sakari? The thought still haunted her as did the man's eyes and his ability to heal almost any wound as well as his armor itself. She blamed the strange affinity she felt to Ryne at the end with the sudden appearance of swaths of Mater pouring through the air.

In all this, what did she really know of Jerem's own plans? Hardly anything.

However, she did know what she would not tell them. Whatever it took, she would drive the pinprick from her mind that she'd felt ever since that night in Castere. It pulled her in Eldanhill's direction. She found the idea scary enough without thinking about the Exalted.

She didn't realize Jerem stopped until she bumped into his back. Before them was a huge door, the Lightstorm insignia emblazoned across its surface. To either side, Dagodin soldiers stood at attention, their gazes seeing nothing and everything.

"Ready?" Jerem asked.

"Yes," she replied, hoping her voice sounded stronger than her knees felt.

The door slowly swung inward.

Chapter 5

Behind Ancel, Charra's grunting barks and growls changed to roars. Wolves howled.

Dear Ilumni, keep them safe, he prayed in earnest. He steeled his back and shoulders. The dizziness he expected swept through him for a moment before it subsided.

As always, he had no explanation for the phenomenon. He wondered if it was a part of his new power or had anything to do with the strange dreams he had trouble remembering at times. The ones he did recall were so vivid he thought he could touch the black leaves in the even blacker forests and feel the power rippling through Jenoah's streets and spires during the distant battle that occupied his fantasy. Recently, those dreams had increased in frequency.

Charra's roars broke him from his reverie. The wolves answered. A grim reminder of what his father and Kachien were fighting.

Ancel pushed the images from his mind and concentrated on the route ahead. No real path showed through the snow and ice-laden brush, and he adjusted several times to skirt a tree. When a stray branch snagged at his legs, cloak, or hitched onto the litter, he swore some god or daemon was conspiring against him. On several occasions, he hacked away such an offending limb. If not for the fact winter's grip squeezed the land and much of the brush had lost its foliage, the progress through the woods may have been nigh impossible. As it stood, branches snapped off, some requiring more effort, but they broke all the same. Pulled by the force of his Da's horse, the litter helped clear a path more than it hindered.

The trip reminded him of earlier that summer when shadelings chased him and Mirza. The memory brought a fresh surge of fear. He found himself peering into the darker patches of the woods, jumping at shadows. At any moment, he expected shadelings to leap from the forest's recesses. Either wraithwolves, green eyes glowing, their fur blackened char, as they ran first on two legs like a man before dropping on all fours to leap and bound; or darkwraiths, their man-like forms more gray smoke than solid flesh. No such beasts revealed themselves. He mouthed a silent prayer to Ilumni.

Despite his faith and the clearer spaces around him, he remained unconvinced of his relative safety. Shadelings hadn't been spotted in more than two months now. He'd hunted down several to appease his anger, need for revenge, and to prove himself. When those outlets expired, he turned to hunting the regular wolves. *Suppose there was some stray shadeling everyone missed?* Finding the Eye, he worked the thought from his mind.

Within the Eye, he took in all around him. Auras bloomed in the form of colors across any living thing. The insects, the birds, small cretins foraging among the undergrowth, even the trees. It was like looking at the world through a rainbow. Over time, he'd learned each color represented the essences that existed within everything. They also gave him a hint of intention. From what he saw, nothing threatening existed within his surroundings.

Late afternoon was dragging on into evening and the cold day becoming colder. Seen through the cover of oak and cedar, white and gray saturated the sky like dirty milk. Heralds of a snowstorm. Snowflakes trickled through such openings to land on his cloak and leather-armored arms, dissolving before they accumulated. The white of frosted leaves and branches, and in some places icicles from frozen water runoff, sprinkled the area. Ancel crunched a passage through, breaking the stillness around him. He shushed the horse to calm whenever a wolf howled.

More confident than before, he weaved his way through, gaze focused ahead so as not to allow the fear of pursuit to overwhelm him. The cold became a needle pricking in his gut and tingling his toes, heightening the sense of urgency within him. He goaded the horse on.

Gray and white flashed across his periphery. He tracked the movement, the beast tearing through undergrowth to reach him. A breath whooshed out of him when he realized it was Charra.

The daggerpaw needed no commands. Charra bounded ahead, crashing through any obstacles in the way that wasn't a tree. His bone hackles lopped off saplings as if a blademaster hewed a path.

Ancel urged more speed from the horse. With Charra clearing the way, their speed doubled, and he resorted to jogging to keep up. He flirted with the idea of mounting, but the position of the ropes around the shoulders and down the saddle appeared to be a pain his balls could do without.

The next hour dragged by with the horse laboring, steam rising from its mouth as it snorted and flicked its head to one side. Ancel slowed their progress, giving the animal time to rest. He removed the waterskin from the saddle and finally stopped. Chest heaving in deep breaths, the horse bowed its head as Ancel let the water run into his cupped hand below its mouth. The mount slurped greedily at the liquid.

Deep indentations marked where the ropes had pressed against the horse's shoulders. Sweat coated its brown hair. Stefan's mount was used to frolicking or going on short runs not this sort of physical labor.

Ancel strode around to the litter to inspect the giant. His chest still moved at the same steady rate. The arrow wound no longer bled,

but Ancel still worried. The man's skin, where not covered by the Etchings, had grown more discolored, more frostbitten to where his lips were a ruinous black.

Whatever was happening, they needed to reach Eldanhill and Galiana Calestis as soon as possible. Ancel hurried back to the horse and set it moving again. The litter edged forward, and soon they were travelling at a steady pace. Ancel tugged on the reins for a little more speed.

The trip stretched on. He no longer heard the noise of the wolves behind him. Birds twittered and flitted from branch to branch. A rabbit hopped near their path before stopping to give them a curious glance then bounding away in a blur. The cold seeped in deeper and the snowfall increased, quickly accumulating on his cloak. He hunkered down within the folds of the garment.

The crunches of following feet sounded nearby.

One quick step drew him even with his father's saddle. He removed his bow from where it hung and turned to face the noise. His hand went up to his quiver, and he nocked an arrow without thought and aimed toward the footsteps. Swirls of snow and an oak tree obscured his vision.

When the first form jogged from behind the tree, tension eased from Ancel's shoulder and arms, and he brought his hand from the arrow's feathery fletching. The shape resolved into his father in his sleeveless, hooded fur jacket. Kachien appeared soon after, moving with a slight limp. Ancel drew fletching to ear again at what followed behind them.

Several wolves, heads low to the ground, slunk back and forth across the path he'd carved through the forest. He counted at least six or seven. More were sure to be close by, out of sight, possibly flanking them. Sure enough, he picked out flashes of gray among the trees farther to their east and west. The animals intended to cut them off.

"Pass me your quiver," Stefan wheezed as he reached him. Blood decorated his fur and leather armor.

Ancel slung the strap from across his shoulder and back and passed it to his father. By this time, Kachien arrived, her limp a little more pronounced. Her clothing displayed several rents, exposing tanned flesh. Blood trickled from paw scratches in those areas. The holes from bite marks on her thigh were plain to see. She shivered profusely. Ancel removed his cloak and fur and threw it over the diminutive woman's shoulder.

"Thank you," she said between clenched teeth, fixing her golden hair over the fur.

"We only managed to escape because one of the packs decided to make a territory challenge," Stefan nodded to where more gray forms

slunk through the distant trees to the east.

"How much time do we have before the fight's decided?" Ancel asked.

"Not much. These fellows appear just to be tracking us until then."

"It makes no difference now," Kachien said, her voice strained. "Look."

Ancel glanced to where she nodded. The end of the Greenleaf Forest was in sight. Beyond were five-foot stone pillars-supports for an unfinished fence or wall of some type-stretching for several thousand feet. Unless the wolves intended to attack them on open pastures, they were safe. Even if the animals did attack, the group would be well within sight from Eldanhill's towers. Help would be forthcoming.

The mumble of a deep voice made Ancel look back toward the litter.

Discolored face and all, the giant propped himself up on one arm. His emerald gaze took them in. Something flickered behind his eyes when they passed over Stefan, and he muttered, "Y-you … dead …" Then he focused on Kachien, features hardening, the recognition unmistakable. He lifted his sword and pointed at her. "A-And you-" He collapsed in a boneless heap onto the wood, his eyes fluttering shut.

Ancel gave them both an incredulous stare. "Do you know him?"

His father shook his head.

"Yes and no," Kachien said.

Ancel frowned.

"Remember I told you I had a task to protect a boy and watch a man in Carnas?"

Thinking back to that time in the Randane's sewers, Ancel nodded.

"He is that man."

Chapter 6

Irmina waited patiently as she'd been doing for several hours now, inspecting the foyer and marveling at its cleanliness. Anything to keep her attention off the angry voice emanating from the inner room where the Exalted resided. Paintings decorated the closest wall. On the other side were bookshelves lined with glass-encased tomes, the vellum within as fragile as a mummified carcass. The dead-eyed expression of the High Shin standing before the shelves dissuaded her urge to approach the cases.

Back the way she came, silver-armored Dagodin stood guard at evenly spaced intervals on a bridge that spanned the library below. Small lightstones hanging from chains around their neck, several dozen High Shin drifted among neat piles of aged books, stopping to jot down notes. Irmina yearned to go down into the Iluminus' renowned Great Library and question its Custodians. The annals beckoned to her with promises of unraveling the truth of her family's demise. Surprisingly, the entire area lacked the mustiness of old paper. It was devoid of odor. The missing scent evoked a sense of emptiness.

High Shin Jerem's voice rose behind the lone door in the foyer. Irmina fidgeted as she turned to face the entrance once more. She could count on one hand the number of times Jerem ever became that angry. Even muffled to the point where she could not make out the words, the vehemence attached to his tone was plain.

She winced at another shout from her mentor. If someone else spoke to the man, they were indiscernible. The large oak doors swung open as if blown by a powerful gust.

Face livid, High Shin Jerem stormed from the room. "May Ilumni have mercy on you all," he yelled, and stalked away. He winked as he drew abreast of her before he strode toward the bridge, muttering to himself.

"Irmina?"

"Yes," she managed, still gaping at Jerem. She turned to face a dark-haired High Shin with tight, disapproving eyes. A lump formed in her throat. The High Shin hadn't addressed her by any form of title.

"The Exalted will see you now."

Legs wooden, the stone floor seemingly miles beneath her feet, Irmina bowed and approached the door. A near blinding luminescence filled the room beyond. Taking a deep breath, she stepped through the opening and into the light. The door swung shut behind her with a soft click.

"Irmina Nagel," a disembodied voice said from all around her.

Irmina paused. Compared to outside, which was practically devoid of scent, the Exalted's room reeked. The pungent odor reminded her of decomposition, festering wounds, of something dying. Her pulse quickened as she remembered the stink from the Wraithwoods and from the shadelings in Castere Keep. If she was anywhere but the Iluminus, she would have sworn the shade inhabited the room. Involuntarily, her hand slid down to her empty scabbard.

"You were brought here today to show you are worthy of the calling you seek." This second voice was different, almost as if water dripped while the person spoke. It chased the thoughts from her mind. "There will be but one chance for you to turn back and resume your duties as an Ashishin. Now is your chance. Decide."

Irmina licked her lips and then cleared her throat. "What happens if I don't want to decide?"

"Then we may decide to strip you of your current status. Uncertainty is unbecoming for an Ashishin." This voice hissed like water poured over hot coals.

"And if I fail?"

"You will be nothing." Another new voice, this time with a musical tinkle.

A Raijin, an Ashishin, or nothing. Why can't these things ever be simple?

"Choose." The command was like a rumble of thunder. For some reason it irritated her.

"Suppose I turned back now, what then?"

"You will remain an Ashishin until the end of your days," the disembodied voice announced.

Well, that didn't sound so bad. There are worse ways to die.

"Many have failed before you. Many have decided not to proceed," said the hiss.

"There is no shame if you lack the ability." The person with the musical tone was almost mocking.

The speeches continued in a susurrus, goading her, giving her doubts, some encouraging, some belittling. They spilled forth so fast, her head spun. It was as if a crowd surrounded her, taunting. She always hated being bullied. Temper flaring, she opened her mouth to answer then abruptly stopped. Now she understood why Jerem shouted earlier, why he was so out of character, why he winked. A reminder.

Irmina sought the control of the Eye. She floated within its center while her anger, fear, confusion, and a dozen other emotions skittered on the outside. She said nothing.

Moments passed with the voices' taunts. Abruptly, they stopped.

Silence stretched for what felt like an eternity.

“Good,” disembodied said. “A Raijin must know when not to speak.”

“However, there is still a choice to be made. Do you wish to take the test?” asked the voice that dripped.

She offered no answer.

“Good. A Raijin must never be forced into any decision but their own.” The response came in a hiss.

“Why did you allow he who was responsible for your family’s demise to go free?” The musical voice continued in rhythmic tones, “Why did you spare the life of one of the greatest threats to our rule? A threat to peace?”

Irmina gritted her teeth, almost losing her hold on the Eye with the mention of her family. “Everything is not always what it seems.”

“Good,” disembodied said. “A Raijin must see what others cannot.”

“Do you understand why we do what we do? Why the values of Streamean worship is so important?” All the voices rang out in a chorus.

Irmina almost smiled. “Unity.”

“Why?”

“It’s the basis of the greatest strength. The togetherness of the gods, the religions, and man are the way for survival and prosperity, so is the unity of mind, body, and Mater.”

The room became quiet. Slowly, the silence grew to something palpable in Irmina’s chest. Then the voices began to whisper. Unrecognizable, the conversation flitted back and forth.

“There’s another issue before us,” the Exalted said in concert.

Irmina waited patiently.

“High Ashishin are taught to plot against each other. This is one of the ways to see who is worthy of becoming Exalted. But none has been so bold as your High Shin Jerem.”

“What do you mean?”

“He plots against the Exalted themselves.”

“I know nothing of his plans.”

“What would you do if you were in our position?”

“Dispose of the threat.” She pictured eyebrows rising at her suggestion.

“What of the belief we teach in avoiding violence? The harmonies between man and his world?”

“Such a balance will take care of itself.”

“Good. A Raijin must know when to look past any supposed rules to strive for the greater good.” Again this came from all the Exalted.

Another lull followed in the questioning as they resumed the quiet conversation between themselves. Strain as she might, Irmina

failed to make out any words or individuals. The whispers reminded her of those at the edge of her mind when her emotions rose to a boil and she attempted to touch her Matersense. But those voices goaded, begged for her to kill in order kill to appease them. The Exalted's whispers lacked a comparable malevolence.

"Irmina Nagel, your people in Eldanhill joined in the recent uprisings against the Tribunal. They have not gone as far as some of the others in Granadia, rebuking Streamean worship altogether, but their rebellion must be dealt with. An example must be made of their leaders."

Irmina's lips quirked, but she held in her smile. "As you wish. I am but the bladed extension of your will."

"Good. A Raijin's loyalty is to Ilumni and the Exalted first, the Tribunal second. All else is of no consequence."

Profane, placing yourselves on the same level as a god. She almost asked where the people themselves fit in. Instead, she bowed in acquiescence.

"Raijin Nagel, what did you discover of Ryne Waldron … or Nerian, if you prefer."

Irmina held in a gasp at their mention of her title. Not throwing back her head and laughing in exultation was only made possible by the Eye. "Beyond that he may be descended from the Eztezians, and he wields a power unknown to all, not much. He now has some strange link between himself and someone I once knew in Eldanhill. When it happened, I felt it. It was as if the entire world and all its Mater were interconnected through them. When I left him, he was headed to Eldanhill. His bodyguard turned out to be a netherling. He-" She cut off as the voices rose so loud she could barely think. They rasped, tinkled, thundered, dripped and everything else in between.

"Raijin Irmina. You have your first task. Kill Ryne Thanairen Waldron, whoever he has linked with, and the Eldanhill Council."

Chapter 7

By the time they reached Eldanhill's walls, several guards had already come to escort them. The soldiers cupped their hands over their mouths and noses and glanced back at the giant who now lay on a two-wheeled dray drawn by two horses. The flatbed cart trundled through the ankle high slush covering the Eldan Road's cobbles. Boots squishing in the muddy snow, Ancel strode next to the stranger, pointedly ignoring the curious looks from townsfolk. Several dogs chased the dray for a moment, barking at the unconscious man before Ancel shooed them away. The absence of nosy children running by to point or stare in awe was as out of place as the signs and results of the Sendethi attack on Eldanhill.

Forty-foot wooden walls and the towers along its length were the first of those. Inside Eldanhill, they'd rebuilt much of the buildings destroyed during the siege. Stone and woodwork of new construction stood in stark contrast to the charred, skeletal remains of some homes. From the top of the Streamean temple's clock tower flew two banners: the Setian Quaking Forest and the Dosteri Guardian Wall with its shield emblazoned against a background of battlements. Soldiers in beige Dosteri uniforms or Setian green marched down the road. Some dotted the towers along the ramparts.

A few of the big, rawboned Seifer and Nema mountain men still sauntered along the streets, quick to show their teeth, imitating their pet wolves and daggerpaws. Several gathered around a clear area near the stables, cheering or pumping their fists at a group of six clansmen. Some leveled taunts in their guttural language or attempted to curse in Granadian, their accents slurred, making Ancel smile with the way they mispronounced many words.

In the open space, the six mountain men played a game of senjin. They tossed the leather ball between them while tackling each other with a myriad of moves in an attempt to score in a small marked off area divided into six even parts. On each team, one of them stayed back to protect his goal, by rule not allowed to cross zones to join the melee. At present, those on offense appeared to have the upper hand as they stepped out of the other defender's designated area to gang up on one opponent. A few swift kicks and punches later, the contest became two versus two in the final area. From the bloody faces and reddish snow churned under by their boots, they took their sport seriously.

Life had changed in Eldanhill. The smithies worked around the clock now, creating weapons and armor, the clang of their hammers near incessant. The attack and construction of the new wall gave more

work to the stonemasons than they could handle, and they often brought apprentices in from Harval, deep within the Red Ridge Mountains. Mining and quarrying had become a required profession. Any able-bodied men, when not on soldiering duty, took up the task.

Several retired Ashishin helped to imbue some of the weapons being crafted into *divya*. The process was not only tiring but also a great risk of their control. Only the strongest attempted it. Townsfolk who remained, and lacked the ability at least to become Dagodin, still learned the sword and went through the rigors of soldier training. The classes at the Mystera had almost tripled with refugees pouring in from a few of the other small villages, farms, and towns in the Whitewater Falls region.

Once the shadelings lost their leader, they resorted to raiding whatever they could manage. The outlying villages and farms suffered the brunt of these attacks from the remnants of the wraithwolves and darkwraiths. At least until Eldanhill's Dagodin cohorts set to work in cleaning up the menace. Eldanhill expected no help from the Tribunal. Supposedly, they considered all of Sendeth as part of the same uprising to overthrow their rule. Their first task appeared to be to cut off the infection at the head.

The allied army of Sendeth and Barson had practically disappeared overnight, amid reports the Tribunal had struck Randane itself, sending Pathfinders into King Emory's Palace. War raged daily around Randane's walls. A Tribunal army several hundred thousand strong also marched for Barson.

The other territories had stayed out of the conflict, not wanting to incur the Tribunal's wrath. There still had been no retaliation to Eldanhill raising the Setian banner, but Stefan insisted a response was inevitable.

So, Eldanhill prepared, and in the meantime, they sent those too young or old to fight to the Red Ridge Mountains. Dosteri forces guided them from there in a long trek across eastern Granadia and to the Dosteri capital city of Torandil. There, they were to wait within the safety of the city's walls.

Ancel wondered when and if Eldanhill's own Mystera would close like all the others. Although he had no confirmation, he guessed they would make a mass exodus from Torandil, head to Ostania, and reclaim Seti. His true heritage. The thought seemed unreal. Dreaming of doing a thing, in this case going off to war beyond the Vallum of Light in Ostania, was vastly different from the reality. Even if it was not on the side he'd imagined.

"Any idea where he came from? Or why he stinks like that?" Mirza's reedy voice interrupted his thoughts. His friend scrunched up his nose.

“None.”

“But you have an inkling who he is.” Mirza cocked his head to one side, the bush under his chin reminding Ancel of red sand.

“I suppose.”

“Suppose my ass,” his friend said, some of his old playfulness coming through. Hair reaching to his shoulder, Mirza had filled out in the past months, spending most of his time practicing with the Dagodin after receiving an early promotion by Shin Galiana. He’d also become versed in the *Disciplines of Soldiering*. His Setian uniform appeared as natural on him as the clouds were to the sky.

“Fine.” Ancel gave him a bemused smile. He leaned forward so his father couldn’t hear. “He’s the one that’s supposed to teach me.”

“I figured as much once I saw Mr. Tapestry Man here.”

“It’s been him all along.”

“Huh?”

Ancel rolled his eyes at Mirza’s confused frown. “The link,” he whispered.

Mirza’s lips formed an O.

“Right now it’s the size of a senjin ball with him this close to me.”

Mirza groaned. “Don’t remind me of that damn game. I bet one of the Seifer I could make it to the end of the field untouched.” He turned the side of his face to reveal a mottled bruise. “I was on my ass before I made it halfway across, and he’d taken the ball, scored, and had the nerve to dance. Never saw the big brute coming.” He shook his head. “I need to find out how they move so damn fast.”

Ancel covered his mouth to suppress his grin. “Next time, leave senjin to me. I keep telling you speed isn’t all that matters.”

“Whatever. So who shot him?” Mirza glanced at the giant.

“Da did.”

“And he lived?” Mirza whistled. “Why? Didn’t you tell your father?”

“We were fighting off some wolves and the man showed up. Stepped out of the woods with that monster sword in his hand.”

Mirza glanced over at the weapon the giant still clutched. “I’d have shot him too.” He snorted. “How’d wolves manage to hurt Kach?”

“I don’t know, but they’ve grown smarter.” He replayed the images of them feinting before they attacked, how they’d tried to hide that he’d wounded one of them, and shook his head in disbelief. “They set a trap for me.”

Mirza chuckled.

“What?” Ancel said, glowering at him.

“The wolves set a trap for the trapper. If you don’t see the irony …” Mirza’s voice trailed off.

“Anyway,” Ancel said, “Kach and Da held them off while I escaped with him.” He nodded to the dray. “By the time they caught up, she had that bite on her leg.”

“Well,” Mirza said, “I’ll get some of the men in my cohort together and go take a look for these wolves of yours.” He leaned closer to inspect the giant. “Why’s he so blue and black in the face and hands? You would think he’d been standing outside for an entire winter. I mean, that can’t be good. He’ll probably lose a finger or two or worse. Some of the dead tissue is gone past anything mending can do.”

“I don’t know, but he was moving fine enough until Da shot him.”

“Wait,” Mirza’s brow bunched, “Ancel,” his voice lowered almost to a whisper, “we tried to damage that arm of yours since you got those … Etchings.” He glanced around after saying the word before continuing, “But nothing affects it. How could your Da’s arrows …”

“*Divya,*” Ancel whispered. “That’s what Da used. I’m sure of it. He also sounded like he knew the man or rather the Etchings, but then he stopped talking about them.”

“Did you ask him-?”

Ancel cut him off with a flat-eyed expression.

“Right,” Mirza said, “I forgot your Da is as stubborn as you are when you want to keep a secret. Anyway, you think he’s near invincible to normal weapons like you?” Mirza’s gaze drifted to the giant.

“Maybe, but remember it still hurts when I get hit on mine.” Ancel paused. “There’s something else …”

“What?”

“I think he might have recognized my Da. He knew Kachien for sure.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Remember when she told us about her orders in Ostania?”

Mirza frowned.

“About the man and the boy?”

Mirza stroked his red beard for a moment then nodded.

“Supposedly, he’s that man.”

“Didn’t she say they died?”

Ancel shook his head. “No. She said she failed.”

Silence ensued as they continued their trek through Eldanhill. One of the soldiers in front yelled to keep the way clear as they reached the more crowded parts of town, passing along the tight stalls and shops of Market Row and into Thanairen Square. The noise of criers and others shouting their wares drowned out the rumble of the dray’s wheels. Stalls occupied almost every space within the market. Peddlers rubbed or blew in their hands or simply stomped to drum up

some warmth. Some stayed close to fires. A few shoppers congregated near where peddlers sold soup or hot broth. The aroma of food and the press of unwashed bodies mingled for an unpleasant odor. A fur seller in one corner was doing brisk business. He nodded in Ancel's direction. Ancel shook his head. He had no pelts or furs to provide the trader this day.

"Any word yet about when or if they'll close the Mystera?" Ancel asked as they turned east down Henden Lane. Off to their left began Learners Row and the line of large, three and four storied buildings, halls, and open spaces where the Teachers, all retired Ashishin, held their classes.

"None yet, but Jillian left earlier to escort what's to be the last convoy to Torandil."

Ancel breathed a sigh of relief. The animosity between Jillian and his father had grown since the man took Mother. He often felt it was only a matter of time before they fought openly. This must have been Galiana's way to dissolve the problem. Always plotting, that woman. He shook his head.

Chests puffed out, several cadets garbed in blue and sporting the gold shield and sword of Dagodin in training stepped out from the Row. When the cadets looked toward the guard and saw Mirza's green uniform, they ducked their heads quickly and hurried toward the market. Ancel smiled. They hadn't even acknowledged his father where he strode with the horse's reins in his hands. Stefan was the commander of all the military in Eldanhill, but his furs and leathers often made him appear as unassuming as the next man.

"Remember when we were just like them?" Mirza gestured with his head toward the young soldiers.

"Yes, less than a year ago."

"Look at us now." Mirza spread his hands to show off his uniform and matching jacket. The crossed swords of a Dagodin Knight glinted on his lapel.

"You mean look at you now," Ancel said.

"Bah. Why do you do that?" Mirza flicked at his hair in irritation. "You're more than any of us."

"And yet still I'm not. If someone asked after my title, what would you say?"

Mirza tilted his head to one side, stroking his beard again. Eyes narrowing, he contemplated for a bit more before he shrugged.

"Exactly. For all my talent and this so called Gift, whatever it is, I'm nothing," Ancel said bitterly.

"I wouldn't go that far, but I understand." Mirza took a deep breath. "Listen. Whatever you're meant to do, you'll find a way just like you found one past your issues with Irmina. Right there," his gaze

roved over the giant, “is your start.”

“Start to what though?”

“That, my friend, is a good question.”

Ancel gazed out toward the Kelvore River as they made the sharp turn off Henden Lane onto one the many small alleys crisscrossing this part of town. Swollen by precipitation from the northern ranges, the river’s deep swirling waters rushed by. A gray mass of clouds hung over the mountains. Set next to the Kelvore, this was the one part of town without walls. “You ever wonder where we would be if things didn’t happen like they did?”

“I don’t wonder. I know. We’d be dead,” Mirza replied.

Ancel contemplated his words for a moment. “If you let Dan tell it, we may as well be dead by staying here.”

Danvir had decided to leave with the old, the children, and the others who didn’t wish to be a part of the fighting to come. Ancel recalled hugging his broad-shouldered friend before Danvir set off as part as the escort to Torandil.

“Dan turned into a coward.” Mirza hawked and spat. “I never expected that from him.” Mouth twisting in contempt, he continued, “We were supposed to be in this together, going off to be knights, fighting to keep Granadia safe. Now the world’s at stake, what does he do? He flees at the first sign of killing like some green-eyed girl.”

“Not everyone is made from the same mold, Mirz,” Ancel said. Sometimes, he did miss their big friend. He could picture Danvir’s oversized nose and ears and his eyes bulging at the sight of the giant. “Not everyone can be as cold as you when it comes to taking a life either, not even me.”

“We do what we must.”

“Indeed.”

“Speaking of old friends, you heard anything from Alys?” Mirza broke into a wry smile.

Ancel’s lips gave an involuntary twitch. He missed her. “The last eagles to arrive said they’d reached Torandil safely. Good thing too. Just in time before the hardest bit of winter hits. For a while there I was worried. Waiting for that eagle made me wish there was a faster way to travel between cities, you know, like the ancient Travelshafts or something.” Ancel pictured himself riding through the tunnels that stories said existed between the major cities, arriving in a third of the time it would take to make such a journey by horseback.

“If wishes had wings, pigs would fly,” Mirza said.

“I always thought that was a dumb saying. What does it mean anyway?”

“Who knows,” Mirza shrugged, “it sounds wise, and that’s all that matters.”

Ancel snorted. He eyed the sky again. Snowflakes swirled down like white ash from the thick, gray quilt stretching from the Kelvore Mountains all the way to the Red Ridge farther east.

“Although I don’t like why Danvir left, I wonder if we shouldn’t have done the same,” Mirza said.

Surprised to hear Mirza admit as much, Ancel arched an eyebrow.

“I mean, I know we stayed to arm our soldiers properly and all. And to recover from the Sendethi attack, but we should have left by now. Time is dragging. Every day I expect shadelings to charge from the Greenleaf or pop out of thin air. It’s not a good feeling. The fact that the Council isn’t turning away any refugees doesn’t help. More and more people are beginning to talk as if we’re home, like the old days, as if everything is fine. It isn’t.”

“I know what you mean.” Ancel glanced down at the giant. “Maybe, we were waiting for him.”

“Let’s hope so.”

They traveled the last several hundred feet in silence, the snowfall growing heavier. Ancel prayed he was right about the stranger, because Mirza was right. Hanging around in Eldanhill did not bode well. At some point, either the Tribunal’s Pathfinders would come or the Sendethi would win out and strike against Eldanhill once more. Worse yet, the man who’d taken his mother might return with the shadeling army he commanded.

One thing appeared certain. He needed to be prepared, and he hoped his teacher provided all the answers to his questions.

“We’re here,” Stefan called from ahead as they pulled up in front of Shin Galiana’s hospice.

Chapter 8

"Are you positive that was their order?" High Shin Jerem asked for the third time as he paced to the room's window. "To kill Ryne?"

"Yes," Irmina stressed, "and also whoever he's linked with."

Jerem paused for a moment. "They said this after you told them what?" He began to pace again.

"That Ryne may be descended from the Eztezians, and-"

"No. No." He waved a pale, spindly hand and stopped in the middle of the carpet between the window and the table. "They already knew what he was. What did you say directly before the command?"

"I told them he was headed to Eldanhill, and his bodyguard turned out to be a netherling."

Jerem harrumphed. Stroking his beard with his thumb and forefinger, he peered out the window. "Come here. Let this be your first lesson as a Raijin."

Irmina hesitated for a moment before tightening her shoulders and striding over to her mentor.

He pointed out the window. "What do you see?"

Standing next to High Shin Jerem always gave her a sense of smallness despite his fragile appearance. It wasn't the fact he stood head and shoulders taller than her either. Something about the man made her think of herself as inconsequential. The sight out the window increased the sensation a hundred fold.

Day after day, Jerem had sent her into the Iluminus' streets to study them and the people. He'd made her plan as if someone was chasing her and she needed to escape. Anytime she asked his reason for doing so, he said the same thing. 'Knowing your surroundings and every avenue available to you will one day save your life.' She'd stopped questioning him after a mission to assassinate a trader in Barson's capital. Only through intimate knowledge of the city did she manage to escape.

Below and across from their tower, streets wide enough to hold several wagons abreast spanned between a canyon of white walls and steel. Many began several stories high between spires, parapets, platforms, doorways, and sometimes disappearing into white light. A latticework of numerous walkways crisscrossed below the window she looked out. The Iluminus was a multitude of structures that made up one building, and yet it was a city within itself. People dotted the paths like specks of dirt blown in the wind. Even the wagons, coaches, drays, and carts appeared no bigger than her arm. From this height in the Iluminus the colors of the different clothes were the blotched paint mixtures on an abstract artist's canvas. One bled into the other.

“What do you see?”

Irmina snapped her mouth shut. “People. Thousands of them. Tens of thousands. Maybe hundreds of thousands.”

“And?”

Lips pursed in concentration Irmina took in the sights. “The vast majority of them are Matii.”

“Good. What else?”

“Many have been using the Travelshafts?”

The portals began along the Shining Way, which was one of the brightest and broadest avenues in the Iluminus. The crowds were packed more densely there than anywhere else.

“Yes,” Jerem pursed his lips, “and that in itself may prove more than troublesome, but that’s not what I meant. Tell me more. About the Matii themselves.”

“They all belong to the Tribunal, to the Exalted.”

Jerem harrumphed. “Continue.”

“The light?”

“What about it?”

“There isn’t a single shadow.”

He gave a noncommittal grunt. “Open your Matersense.”

Irmina did as he commanded.

The essences within the elements of Mater inhabiting everything in the world bloomed before her eyes. They rolled through the air in waves and bands, some thick, others thin, some clearly visible and others faint wisps. They varied in color similar to the people below.

“What do you see now?”

Brow puckering as she strained to take in the sight of it all, Irmina attempted to tell the individual essences apart. Earth, metal, and wood were all a part of the element of Forms and its solids. The air and what must be water trickling off into self-contained drains running vertically down the many buildings, but never spilling out, were both essences within the Flows and its liquids. She squinted for a sight of fire, cold, of the energy of the Streams. Heat rose from the people themselves. Light dominated, imbued within every structure. Shade was almost as prevalent. She paused.

Shade?

How could that be when light engulfed everything from the widest space, the tallest building, to the tiniest nook? The pride of the Iluminus was that no shadow could enter its halls. No creature of the shade could breach its walls. Yet, here was the essence of shade.

“Well?” Jerem asked, tone patient.

“I–I don’t understand,” Irmina said. “How does shade exist in a place without a single shadow. A place where light is ever present.

“How indeed,” Jerem said musingly.

“Why can I see it? Why can’t anyone else?”

Her thoughts whirled. She needed to understand the shade’s existence despite the light stored within the Iluminus. Possible answers flitted across her mind, but she dismissed each as improbable. The shade could not have hidden there in secret. What she witnessed was not an illusion. The Exalted had to be aware of the essence’s presence. The possibility of some unknown malevolence residing within the Iluminus seemed as preposterous as the Exalted themselves being shadelings.

“You didn’t really think the Exalted promoted you only because of what you have accomplished? Anyone strong enough to become a Raijin is tested. Those who fail …” his voice trailed off. “This is a secret only the highest know. The Iluminus must be seen to be without reproach for the most part.”

The answer struck her like a hammer blow. She gave him an incredulous stare. He smiled, his eyes giving off a delightful twinkle.

“The Tenets,” she whispered. “The first sentence of the Tenets for both of them. Light to balance shade. Shade to balance light.”

“But they destroy each other,” Jerem countered. “Each fated to forever oppose.”

“There are no absolutes.”

“Are you sure?” Jerem’s wisp of an eyebrow rose. “Is light not the direct opposite of shade?”

“Yes, but they’re equals,” Irmina said, certain of herself now. “One relies on the other. There is no light without shade, and no shade without light.”

“Yet people claim there is no shade within the Iluminus. So where does this darkness come from?”

“Within people’s hearts.”

Jerem’s face beamed with pride. “Excellent. Now you know where to look. Not without but within.”

“Why show me this now? What does this have to do with my orders?” Irmina allowed her attention to drift to the sights outside the window. From where they stood, the noise from all the activity below was a muted buzz.

“The Exalted believe everyone within the Iluminus belongs to them, mind, body and spirit.”

“They don’t?”

“Do you?”

Irmina pondered the question, but found no definitive answer. What she did know was that she would obey her orders.

“At least you are uncertain, which is good. A more prudent question may be to whom do the Exalted belong? What do they seek?” Jerem clasped his skeletal hands behind his back. “You are being sent

to kill a man who might be able to save us. Why? All for the sake of what the Exalted crave. Immortality. Power. Whatever they cannot have no one else should possess, or so they believe. Ryne has the keys to those two things they covet. They fear him. They fear what his coming means, what the presence of a netherling signifies, who he may pass his power to."

"I'm being sent to kill a man who destroyed countless lives." Irmina scowled. "What would you rather me do? He must pay for his atrocities."

"So you are a magister and executioner." He paused. "Ah, but you are a Raijin now, that's your job. However, do not forget you are also my student. What do you know of their plan?"

She looked at the floor. Silence stretched between them. Finally, she let out a deep breath and said, "They're going to attack Eldanhill. That's when I'll have my chance."

"Hmm. You are actually considering the act because it gives you a chance to strike at the Dorns as well as Ryne." Jerem nodded in quiet contemplation. "All that drives you lies at your finger tips, at the edge of your blade."

Irmina squared her shoulders and met his gaze. "They deserve what they have coming to them. What do you expect me to do? Not take revenge on those responsible for my family's murders? Not take from Ryne what he took from so many? I gave up the chance for the sake of the future once. Now, we're safe. I don't care what he's done recently. The man is evil. He-" She cut off as something from Jerem's earlier words came back to her. "What did you mean by a man who might be able to save us? He already did."

Jerem gazed out the window. "So you believe, as simple as a snap of fingers, the shade has been conquered. That which has lingered since the beginning of the world." He shook his head. "You of all people should know things are never what they seem when it comes to the Tribunal."

"I saw him defeat them with my own eyes. The man unleashed gigantic spirits that swept across Castere, destroying the shade and Voliny."

"And this Voliny's master? Did he defeat him too?"

"No, but with his armies gone, he'll surely fall."

That wispy white eyebrow rose. "Really? So a man or creature that this Ryne, who may indeed be a descendant of the Eztezians, could not defeat, will be beaten by us? A being who may be one of Amuni's Skadwaz somehow here from Hydae? I taught you well, but in this one thing you allow your emotions to control your thoughts. Think. Sakari was a netherling. His presence here proves that not only have the seals on the Nether weakened, but so have the wards on the

Kassite preventing man or beast from travelling between realms."

Irmina hung her head. She hadn't thought about all this. Her fists made an involuntary clench. All she wanted to do was avenge her family. Why was it proving so difficult?

Jerem's berating continued. "Next, you will tell me we will defeat the gods when all the seals are broken and they come to claim what was once theirs."

Shoulders sagging bonelessly, she looked up. "What do I do? If all this is going to happen, what can any of us do?"

A twinkle played across Jerem's eyes. "You are a Raijin now. You will figure it out."

"And if I don't?"

"Have faith, I *did* say I taught you well. You have a mission to complete, and I need to leave this place before the Exalted send for me. I am sure they will follow the recommendations you made."

Irmina's eyes bulged. "I–I-I didn't mean …"

"It is fine, my dear girl. You did what I expected. You had to pass your final test or else all I have put you through, all your training, would be for nothing."

"Do you intend to try stop me?"

"Try?" Jerem gave her a bemused smile. "Nothing I *do* is try."

For a moment, she tensed. If she must, she would find some way to defeat the old man, High Ashishin or not.

Jerem's brow quirked once more. "To answer your question, I will do whatever is necessary for Denestia to survive another day." Jerem held her gaze, eyes unwavering.

"What if that means killing me?"

Almost instantly, his face became blank.

The expression sent chills through her body. She used to think she could be cold-hearted, but those sudden dead eyes of Jerem's, eyes that normally showed some kind of amusement, making him seem overly good-natured as if he found much in life comical, brought tiny bumps rising along her skin.

"Come, it is past time we leave." Jerem spun and strode toward the thick oak door.

Irmina gazed at the crimson robes of her teacher's back for a moment before turning her attention out the window. "Dear Ilumni," she prayed, head bowed. "Please show me what I need to do."

A sudden sense of inertia swept through her for a moment, and she reached a hand out to steady herself against the windowsill. A picture of Ancel bloomed in her mind along with the thousands upon thousands of pinpoints representing people drawn together in an intricate and incredibly powerful Forging. The image from the night when she killed Sakari. Why would that come to her now?

Frowning and thinking she needed rest after rushing across Ostania in chase of Ryne and then making her way to Jerem with few breaks in between, she straightened her clothes and followed her mentor.

Chapter 9

Nose upturned at the stench wafting from the giant, Shin Galiana inspected his body where he lay with his thighs hanging off the examination table. The artwork covering his body and armor bore an uncanny resemblance to those on Ancel, but even more detailed. Placing a hand on his chest served to remind her just how small she was compared to the man. No, small would be an understatement. Tiny was more apt.

The flesh appeared to have closed around the arrow, but without removing his armor, she was uncertain. The man also suffered from a severe case of frostbite concentrated in areas not covered by his tattoos.

Etchings, she reminded herself.

The word and the man's size made her think not only of Ancel but also of her past. They both dredged up memories she thought she'd permanently buried. Painful ones. She eased her eyes closed, and told herself the woman she used to be no longer existed. The man she once loved was long gone, sacrificing himself for the greater good. Maybe a time would come for her to revisit those recollections, live that old hurt, and with it, revive her hope, but for now, she needed to concentrate on Ancel and his mentor.

The young man was concerned for the stranger's well being. She sympathized. After all, despite the rigorous Mater training she was putting him through, coupled with the advanced sword work lessons given by Stefan, neither of them were able to teach him about the strange phenomenon etched into his skin. The artwork appeared innocent enough if a bit ominous in some places, but a netherling had bestowed them. She shook her head. A creature linked to the creation of the world itself. If she were any other person, she would have found the idea unbelievable.

Those old memories bubbled to the surface again as she recalled Etchings from other times in her life: from a Svenzar back when Nerian became the Shadowbearer, and even before that, when-. She forced the thought from her mind. As she'd done for innumerable years, she would act as if she had no knowledge of the events she did. In many respects, it was the only way to maintain her sanity.

At present, Ancel and his father waited outside the room. When she left, he'd been pacing anxiously. She smiled. Several months ago, she doubted if he would ever be like he once was, devouring his classes with fervor. But the combination of being hunted by the shade, the attack on Eldanhill, and his mother's taking had changed him as drastically as Irmina abandoning his love. Unlike the pain wrought by

Irmina's loss, most of what he'd become was positive. He was once more dedicated to learning, following instructions in his classes, showing the ability to understand tiny nuances of Forging, and deciphering aspects of the lessons without detailed explanations. His skill with Forging had increased exponentially as had his swordsmanship. Ancel worked tirelessly at both, from the time the classes at the Mystera began in the morning until night. He never complained.

The smile dissolved into a frown as she considered his other side. A darker side. For a while, he'd used the emotions to spur him on and help hunt down the remaining shadelings in Whitewater Falls. Once that threat had been removed, however, he continued to venture into the forests and the mountains, often hunting animals. She recognized the craving at once. A need not just to lash out in anger, but to kill. Had he ever Forged when not within the control of the Eye? Had the essences within Mater already took their toll on him and began a chain of events from which there may be no return? Would Pathfinders arrive in Eldanhill to attempt to take him? At some point, she needed to be certain if the boy had surrendered to the promise of power only the strongest Matii heard. The chance of survival, if he had any, came down to avoiding the Tribunal and the Pathfinders. A daunting, near impossible task.

Shin Galiana chased the thoughts away and focused on the giant. First things first, she must help the boy obtain the necessary training. If what he said was true, before her lay the answers to the Etchings.

The giant's own ended at his neck. She squinted as she studied his features. Something about him seemed familiar, but try as she might, she couldn't place it. *Where have I seen you before?* She paced around him, taking in every nuance of his face, from the ragged scars running down the left side, to the angular jaw and squared chin hidden beneath mounds of facial hair, to the length of his unkempt locks spilling down his back. Whatever it was, something under his wild countenance tried to tickle a memory. After a few minutes straining for a recollection, she gave up and got on with the mending.

The man still clutched his massive greatsword, so she started there. The torches in their sconces on the wall and the candles around the room reflected from the weapon's polished surface, highlighting the runes and glyphs. Only one type of metal carried such a high sheen. Silversteel. Imbued no doubt. A *divya*. She considered Forging to find out exactly what kind but quickly chided herself for almost making a grievous error. There could be some kind of trap or ward worked into the weapon that would trigger when touched by any Forge other than its owner.

She tried to pry his fingers from the sword, but the blackened

joints would not budge. The man's fingers were no longer frozen, but they were as rigid as a block of stone. Disarming him would prove impossible.

The wound, then.

She slid a short stool closer to her table and climbed up. For this type of work, it was best to be directly over what she needed to cut. Leaning to one side, she reached out to the table that held her tools. She straightened with a small knife in her hand. As she bent over the man's prone form, something about his armor caught her eye.

Squinting so tight it almost hurt, she peered from his boots back to his leathers. *How did I miss this?* The man's boots were ragged, indicative of months of nonstop travel. Small rips and tears exposed blackened flesh. She climbed down and walked to the end of the table. The bottom of his boots were so worn that in places the soles of his feet were exposed. *Why did you do this to yourself? What was so important that you traveled until you were in this state?*

However, his feet weren't her greatest concern. If his boots were in this condition, his skin frostbitten where exposed, his hair a dirty, caked-mess, and his body reeking as if he hadn't seen a bath in only the gods knew how long, why, except for the artwork, was his armor as spotless as his sword?

Could those also be Etchings on his leather? They matched perfectly where the sleeves of the chestpiece ended. So much so, she couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

Galiana hurried to the door and peeked outside. "Stefan, come here please."

Ancel snapped to attention from where he sat on a chair against the wall, his eyes anxious. "Is everything fine?"

"Yes. I just need to speak to your father for a moment." She beckoned to the elder Dorn.

In a few long strides, Stefan crossed the room. "What's wrong?" He drew next to her and stared down into her face in an attempt to read her expression.

"We will talk inside." She let him in, took one more glance toward Ancel, gave him a reassuring nod, and then closed the door, and locked it.

"Well?" Stefan paused to look at the giant before turning to face her.

"What did you shoot him with?"

"An arrow?"

"Do not play the fool, Stefan. You know what I mean."

A pained expression drifted across Stefan's face. "A *divya* arrow. I didn't know who or what he was and with things how they are, I always carry one nocked and ready."

“That’s what I thought. Look at his boots and his armor.”

Stefan didn’t turn. “I noticed when we were in the forest.”

“Where have you seen this before? The artwork, or rather, the Etchings.” Galiana ambled over to the body.

“Besides on my son? The Svenzar back when we battled Nerian had the same.”

“Yes. I believe the time has come and that’s why our Listeners have spotted the Svenzar in the Red Ridge Mountains. When I leave, I will send word to all the Listeners to begin the assembly.”

Stefan nodded, his mouth curving into a smile. “The council may not agree. Not that their disapproval would stop you.”

“You and Thania began this, Stefan. The dice have been cast. We cannot pick them up now.”

“Indeed.”

“Now,” she said, “for the second issue. Inspect the sword, carefully.”

Stefan strode to the table and bent close, running his hand along the blade. After a moment, he gasped. “How did I miss this? The markings are identical to Ancel’s sword.”

“Yes. The Access Key,” Galiana said. “This confirms the existence of more than one, but what purpose does his serve?”

“He’s the only one who can answer that.” Stefan straightened. “Can you save him?” He gazed down at the man, his brows drawing together. “I get this … sense as if I know him or should … I don’t like it, but if he’s the chance Ancel needs to harness his power …”

Galiana understood all too well. “I get the same impression but I cannot place his face. As for saving him, I’m not sure.” She opened her Matersense and gasped.

The usual patterns of essences she carefully arranged around her home in wards were now disfigured, seething like a boiling black cauldron. They congregated around the giant’s prone form in bands and strands so thick and comingled she couldn’t separate one from the other. It should have been impossible. Since Mater made up everything within the world, those with an innate ability for mending like herself, were able to distinguish how the essences flowed into a form. How they worked, where light encouraged life, opened an artery, where shade would close the very same blood vessel to prevent overuse or slow a racing heart.

But not on this man.

Where the essences should have touched his armor and body, they stood a few inches above him instead. The space between the seething mass of power and the man was only an inch thick, but it was plain to see. Something around his body prevented Mater from touching him. Some kind of shield. If she cocked her head just right

and strained her Matersense hard enough, she managed to make out a colorless, nebulous membrane.

"Is something wrong?" Stefan asked.

"I cannot mend him." Galiana sagged from the effort of examining the giant so deeply.

"That's a first," Stefan said. "You sure?"

"Yes, there's a shield of some sort protecting him." Vision blurry, she nodded. She located the chair near the table and slid into it.

"Are you well?"

"A-A little tired from reading him."

Stefan strode across the room to her desk against the wall. He poured some water from a pitcher.

"No," she said. "Give me some kinai instead."

He nodded and picked up the other container with the red liquid. "Is there anything you can do to help him at all?" After pouring the water back into its pitcher, he refilled the cup with kinai juice. "I don't know if he's dying, but he doesn't appear to be getting any better." Stefan brought the drink over to her.

She took the cup gratefully. "I am wracking my brain for a solution, a way to mend him, but I come up with nothing." She gulped down a mouthful of kinai, savoring the sweet taste. "Even if I linked with several other Matii, I do not think they would help. Whatever is causing the effect around him, be it his Etchings or his armor, the essences cannot penetrate it right now. I have never seen anything of the sort."

"What if we tried to make a hole using a *divya* the same way I was able to pierce his armor with one?"

She took another deep drink and shook her head. "That's the problem. If the essences cannot get through, how did your arrow?"

"Who knows?" Stefan shrugged.

"I guess it is worth a try."

The kinai began to work, the fire it brought racing down her gullet. Moments later, the fatigue washed away. Refreshed, she stood.

"Should I go out and get the same type of arrow?" Stefan asked from where he stood next to the giant.

"No, I actually have another idea."

Stefan stepped away from the man, making room for her.

The remainder of the kinai in hand, she stood on her stool and stretched over the giant's face until the cup was directly over his mouth. Then she poured.

The liquid splashed onto his lips without the slightest hindrance. His mouth parted and within moments, his throat moved as he gulped down the drink.

"More," Galiana whispered in amazement, passing the cup to

Stefan. Why hadn't she thought of this right away? She used kinai in her most potent mixtures, but it still needed the aid of an actual Forging. Could the properties within the fruit work all on their own?

Stefan brought her another cup filled to the brim. This too she poured down the man's throat.

"Look," Stefan said, his words a hiss of wonder.

Galiana glanced to where Stefan pointed. Her mouth dropped open, jaw unhinged.

The arrow was moving on its own, wriggling up through the leather. Blood dribbled around the wooden shaft. With a final push, the arrow fell to the side, slid off the now invisible shield, and dropped to the floor.

The giant coughed, and his eyes opened.

Chapter 10

Ryne woke from a fitful dream where the world burned. Within it, he fought a black-garbed man, who like himself, employed his Etchings at will. By the man's movements, Ryne determined he used the same Styles as the one he fought when he destroyed the Wraithwoods in the Barrier Mountains.

A painful throb wracked his chest. The remainder of the dream was a blur, but he did remember a man, a dead man, shooting him with a bow. It shouldn't have been possible, but the shaft had somehow penetrated his shield. He also recalled a golden-haired woman with an aura he recognized from deep within the Fretian Woods when he saved Kahkon's life. Vision blurry, he tried to focus, and slowly the shadow above him resolved into the face of a stern looking, silver-haired female with eyes the color of honey.

"W-who are you," he said. To his ears, the words sounded garbled.

The woman frowned before her face disappeared altogether.

Above him was a gray stone ceiling. He reached a tentative hand to his wound and puckered his brow. The hole and the arrow were gone. His armor had also repaired itself. *How?* For the first time he noticed the sweetness on his tongue.

Kinai.

Ryne licked his lips and lurched up into a sitting position. He sniffed. Something reeked. Torches and candles lit the interior of a room, throwing shadows from shelves spaced at even intervals along the walls. Vials, flasks, books and other utensils synonymous with mending crowded the racks. A few chairs, a small stool, a desk, and the table he sat on were the only other furniture in the otherwise small, pristine room. The cleanliness made the stench stand out even more.

"What's that awful smell?" he asked.

"You."

He looked down toward the voice. Face rife with wrinkles, a diminutive woman stood close to the table, her lips twitching into a smile. Dressed in sky blue robes with long flowing sleeves, she studied him. Gnarled fingers interlocked, two skinny forefingers tapping against each other, she appeared to be waiting patiently. Familiar patterns to match her eye color bloomed in her aura.

Ryne scratched at his bearded face. The hair reached down to his chest. "I need a shave."

"You need a bath," the woman said.

He tilted his head to one side. Something about her face definitely

seemed familiar. Awfully familiar. “Do I know you?”

“Do you?”

“I think I do.”

“Oh? From where?”

He opened his mouth to say then snapped it closed, recalling the dead man who shot him. The memory clicked like a key in a lock. He did know her. Ashishin Galiana Calestis, one of his advisors when he was King Nerian the Lightbearer. His sworn enemy when he became Nerian the Shadowbearer. The woman’s presence made the man exactly who he thought: Stefan Dorn, his old Knight Commander and General. Ryne frowned.

Stefan was dead.

He killed the man himself, while Sakari had taken care of his children.

“No, I must be mistaken.” Ryne took a steadying breath before his past atrocities overwhelmed him. “Where’s the man who shot me?”

“I’m right here.”

Body tensing, Ryne turned his head to the voice. It was deeper than he remembered but much the same. So were those eyes. Hard, glinting emeralds, reflecting intelligence with a habit of assessing people and circumstances. Weighing, always weighing. The face was older with a few scars. Gray streaked the once full, dark hair. Stefan Dorn appeared a bit thinner, but as usual, he was clean-shaven and neat even in fur and leather armor.

At any moment, Ryne expected the man to charge him, swinging the sword at his hip. Ryne attempted to appear unconcerned, not allowing his hand to tighten on his greatsword.

Stefan did not move. He simply watched, his eyes missing nothing. No semblance of recognition crossed the old Knight Commander’s face.

Ryne frowned before another sliver of memory came to him. Whoever commanded him in the past had changed his appearance, shrouding him. The Forging settled an inch above his armor and body similar to the shield his aura formed whenever something threatened his life. Using the shroud, his true self remained hidden for centuries. The Forging was similar in many ways to the seals he and the other Eztezians placed on themselves to hide from the shade and prevent themselves from using their power to destroy the world. In his latest incarnation, his present one, the shroud had been removed.

“Why did you attack me? I never meant you any harm,” Ryne said.

Stefan smirked. “Let’s see. You’re a lot bigger than most men. You stepped out of the woods brandishing that monster of yours,” he nodded toward the sword, “while my son and I were fighting wolves.

What did you expect? A welcome clap on the back?"

A son? Impossible. It might explain how his shield hadn't protected him. After all, it was a part of the Etchings. If Stefan had a son, his aura might have disrupted Ryne's. He closed his eyes, inhaling deeply as he recalled giving the order for Sakari to execute Stefan's son and daughter. Not that he wanted to carry out the act, but the Manipulation used on him was something he was unable to break. Thinking back to those events, he'd been a completely different person under the control of a power greater than his own. The idea such a power existed almost made him cringe. In most people's eyes, it would not be an excuse for his crimes.

Ryne opened his eyes. *The boy … Ancel*. Stefan's previous children were Anton and Celina. A different son then, named in the memory of those two. The bond had brought him directly to the boy. Could fate be so cruel as to make Stefan's latest son the one who'd been born with enough power and control for a netherling to bestow its Etchings? Or if not fate then something more? The occurrence did reveal that Stefan's line was even closer to his own than he ever thought. If what he experienced during his arduous trek here held true, the boy might grow into an extremely powerful Eztezian.

However, there was the issue of the darkness he sensed in the boy's aura. "Your boy, is he-"

"He's fine," Stefan said. "Mind telling us what you were doing in the forest?"

"Certainly, but at least tell me your names first? I'm Ryne Waldron." The best lies were those closest to the truth. He'd been Ryne long enough for the name to pass as his real one.

"I'm Stefan Dorn."

"Galiana Calestis," the woman added.

"Hmm," Ryne said. "Both old Ostanian names unless I miss my guess."

They gave slight but noticeable starts before acting as if nothing happened.

Ryne swung one leg over the table's edge and rested his foot on the floor. He stopped when Stefan tensed. "Last I checked I had crossed the Sea of Swirls into Granadia." Ryne made his tone as conversational as possible. "Of course, my bearings might be wrong. I tend to be bad with directions." He smiled sheepishly.

Galiana gave an almost imperceptible nod to Stefan. "You are indeed correct. We are of Ostanian descent, but then so are you, if your skin, features, and size are a good judge."

"I did say I crossed the Sea of Swirls."

"And you came to Eldanhill for?" The edge in Stefan's voice could slice skin from flesh.

Ryne smiled again, this time allowing his eyes to become serious. “For your boy, Ancel.”

“How did you-” Stefan cut off, an expression that could crack rocks drifting across his face. “What do you want with my son?”

“I think you both know.”

“What makes you say that?” Galiana shuffled over to a wall and picked up a staff. With the polished wood for support, she tapped her way over to the desk and sat.

Obtaining your divya and putting distance between yourself and me, then. “Well first, if a man appeared with the mess my face feels, carrying a sword like I have, and caused me to use my bow,” Ryne met Stefan’s scowl, “I would either kill him or leave him where he was. I wouldn’t save him.”

“Maybe we did so out of kindness.” Galiana shrugged.

Stefan muttered something under his breath.

“Possible,” Ryne agreed. “However, not only did you save me, but when I mentioned I was here for your son, you didn’t immediately try to kill me. In fact, neither of you appeared the least bit surprised. You showed more shock at me knowing you were Ostanian than at me saying I’m here for the boy.”

“Maybe we aren’t intimidated by you,” Stefan said. “By the way, he’s not a boy. He’s quite the young man.”

Ryne didn’t allow his smile to touch his eyes. “Overconfidence can be a man’s downfall.”

“As self-doubt is the precursor to failure,” Stefan said, finishing the quote from *the Disciplines.* His eyes narrowed for a moment.

“I would be confident too if with a split second’s thought and a *divya* bow I could kill a man.” Ryne fingered where the arrow had pierced. “Another reason I realized you both know why I’m here. The fact the weapon worked confirms I’m either a shadeling or a Matii. I’m sure our Galiana here can tell I’m no shadeling. After all, unless I again miss my mark, those golden eyes confirm she’s a Matus of considerable skill, at least a High Shin. Only those who’ve practiced for centuries see such a change.”

Those words brought Galiana to her feet before she eased herself back into her chair.

Ryne smiled at her restraint. “I wonder what that makes you, Stefan? Either there’s been trouble with shadelings in … what did you call it? Eldanhill? Or an issue with Matii. Or maybe both.”

Stefan gave him a grudging nod.

“We can sit here and play this game, but there’s only one reason someone like me ends up linked to one such as your son.” Ryne pointed at his Etchings. “He’s received his first set of these from a netherling. You all felt the surge of Mater he released, how primal

those essences were. Precious few exist who can teach him what he needs before his power consumes him and drives him to destroy all he loves. Of those, more than their fair share are insane or will kill anyone who dares approach within a few miles. So, either you can allow me to do what I've been summoned for, or I can leave and let events play out as they may."

Stefan opened his mouth to speak, but Ryne held up his hand.

"Alternatively, I can simply take him. Without me, he *will* lose control." Ryne stared down Galiana. "You both know what that entails."

"I stopped you once, I'll do so again." The edge to Stefan's voice was sharpened silversteel.

Greatsword in hand, Ryne shrugged, swung his other foot casually off the table, and stood, his full height forcing him to bend his neck so he wouldn't bump his head on the ceiling. "That will not happen twice."

In response, Stefan's hand flew to his sword hilt in an eyelid's blink.

With a shake of his head, Ryne sheathed his weapon in the scabbard on his hip. "I need you to trust me." He glanced from one to the other. "Both of you."

"You talk as you do, look as you do, threaten me and mine, and now you ask for trust?" Stefan gave him an incredulous stare.

"Yes. I won't make things appear less dire than they are. A darkness exists within the boy. He's hurting. From the look in both your eyes, you've seen it. It *will* consume him if you deny him my help."

For the last few minutes, Galiana had appeared deep in thought. Now she spoke. "If we are to trust you or begin to, I need to know something."

Ryne nodded.

"A netherling, one of the most powerful creatures written about in the legends of the world, presumably a descendant of the gods themselves, bestowed a power on Ancel. It tells him someone is coming who will train him. You appear covered in the same power of which he only has a tiny portion." Galiana's golden-eyed gaze met his. "Who or what are you, Ryne?"

Ryne allowed his face to become deadly serious. "I'm Ryne, the other part of your legend about gods, netherlings, and daemons. I'm an Eztezian."

Gasps escaped Stefan, but Galiana appeared unsurprised. An instant later, Stefan's eyes narrowed, his hand drifting to his sword once more.

"There's no need to worry," Ryne said, the lie rolling from his

tongue smoothly. “My power is fully under control. I’ve not used enough of it for me to go mad or cause senseless destruction.” *But in training your son I will surpass that threshold.* He’d long accepted that fact on the way here. Teaching his ward was necessary, even if it meant he sacrificed himself.

In the back of Ryne’s mind, several other pinpoints came to life, bonds similar to the one he had with Ancel, but of a lesser quality. He frowned as they veered away from the path he would have expected. No sense in worrying over them now, they could handle themselves. His purpose here called to him.

Chapter 11

Doubt seeped into Irmina with the thought of the Exalted's orders to kill Ryne and his mentor. Although she knew it meant Ancel, she prayed she might be mistaken. In her mind, she imagined Ryne visiting Eldanhill only to find he was wrong about the person he thought he'd felt that day in Castere. It helped a little. What didn't help was picturing Ancel and her when they were younger, flirting, playing together. They would engage in their favorite game of taking a chunk of glass and watching as it reflected rainbow-like colors on the Whitewater Inn's walls. She gritted her teeth against the memory.

To make the situation even worse was the sinking suspicion that the tiny knot inside her head was Ancel. This close to Eldanhill, she found it incredibly difficult to ignore. And it had grown.

At the Iluminus, her goal seemed so clear. Now, when she considered Ryne's power and Jerem's words she wondered how she would be able to complete her mission. She harbored no illusions of defeating Ryne in a fair battle, maybe not even in an unfair one, but she was willing to try. Ryne had said he was going to Eldanhill for Ancel, to help him, and that he needed her too. *What can you possibly know of Ancel or me, for that matter?*

Hunched into her horse's saddle, she fidgeted with her clothes, smoothing the front of her thick woolen tunic. The pants fit a bit snug, showing off her shape, but served the purpose of allowing her to tuck the ends inside her boots. She buttoned her fur-lined overcoat once again.

Denestia's twin moons cast their silvery glow across the land, bathing the snowdrifts and mounds along the plains north of Eldanhill in a ghostly sheen. Even from where she and Jerem stood, the distant roar of the great Whitewater Falls reached them. Silence draped their immediate vicinity in a cold sheet. Directly ahead, the walls around Eldanhill rose like some black monolith, stark against the ground's white. Beyond it shone the orange luminescence from torches within the town. A town that had grown to the size of a small city in her absence.

"Nervous?" Jerem asked from beside her.

"Not particularly," she lied even as her stomach fluttered as if she was about to receive Ancel's first kiss.

Jerem chuckled. "A word of warning," he said, becoming serious. "Whatever you do, do not let anyone know you're in the Tribunal's employ. If you do, they will tread lightly around you."

"You don't have to tell me about my own people. Besides, Ryne already knows who and what I am. I'd be more worried about Jillian's

reaction. For years she tried to warn me about the Dorns."

"Well, Jillian isn't there. She's been sent away on another task. As for Ryne, no one must know his true identity. You need to understand that as grievous as your scars are, for some in Eldanhill, theirs are worse when it comes to the man he once was. Those painful memories are another reason I advise against revealing yourself also."

"Fine, I'll keep your warning in mind."

"Well then, I leave the rest to you. Remember, as soon as you move, the guards will see you."

"You aren't worried that I carry out the Exalted's orders?" Irmina avoided looking in Jerem's direction.

"You will do what is necessary." With those words, a horizontal slit appeared in front of Jerem, accompanied by a sound akin to a blade slicing empty air. The slash opened into a shape much like an eye before twisting into a vertical position. Beyond was darkness. He stepped through the portal. It snapped shut behind him.

Irmina was abruptly cold and alone. In the silence around her, the thumping of her heart resounded. She was returning to Eldanhill, the only place she ever called home, and she felt like an utter stranger. Why did the task ahead wear on her so? By no means was this her first mission. She'd been on countless such jobs. She'd deceived, manipulated, coddled, cajoled, and killed, all in the name of her profession and the Tribunal. So why did this feel different?

The ties she cut should have left her emotions free, not jumbled. The thought of the Dorns or the Council on a whole upset her stomach like spoiled food. Her craving for revenge boiled inside her until it seethed, but something, no, someone else made her nervous, gave her second thoughts about what she needed to do.

Ancel. A sigh escaped her lips. *What will you do when I meet you? How will I react?* She drew her cloak tighter around her.

The bell at the top of Eldanhill's Streamean tower tolled in a long gong as if announcing the dead. Torches brightened the towers along the wall's length. Voices shouted orders. Several fireballs arched into the air, their flames crackling and hissing as they met the night sky's cold and moisture.

Cursing to herself as she realized her mistake, Irmina made to flap her reins. Whispers of movement froze her in her tracks. She eased her hand down to her sword hilt and waited.

The snow around her shifted and came alive. In over a dozen places, the white fluff stood in the shapes of men and canines. A few of the animal forms were too huge to be dogs. As if synchronized, they shook, similar to a dog shaking water from its fur. The snow fell away to reveal several large men dressed in furs and animal hides. A torch in one of their hands sparked to life, lighting up the area in orange

hues. Beside each man was a daggerpaw or a wolf, teeth bared, tongues lolling in wicked grins.

Slowly, Irmina regarded each. The Seifer and Nema mountain clans were working together.

"After you, little lady," a gruff voice said.

Someone snickered.

"And nuffing funny. Our babies can run down de fastest horse." The big rawboned man nearest her reached out and patted his daggerpaw. "Not dat your horse can run very fast in dis." He nodded to the snow. "But in case you were tinking you could …"

Irmina smiled at hearing those dialects again. Not only did the man leave off the 'th' in certain words, but others he converted to a 'd' so 'that' became 'dat' and 'this' turned into 'dis'. Some letters changed to an 'f'.

"I've no intention to be doing anything funny," she said. "Although, it's been a while since I've seen a good guiser's play. You know, for a moment there I actually thought you men were dressed the part, disguised as sheep."

A low growl in his throat, the man stepped next to her. "Dere aren't any sheep here, lil miss, only mountain lions. I can show you what it's like to fuck one." He wiggled his waist, the shaggy fur on the front of his pants bouncing with the movement. His fellows guffawed at his joke.

Irmina glanced from Rawbone to his daggerpaw. Cropped short, the man's hair reminded her of the tuft on a donkey's head, and he had a face below it to match. What was worse, his tone sounded much like a bray. She gave him a slow smile. "I'd rather your daggerpaw fuck me than to lay with a mule of a man."

Several clansmen chuckled. Even in the moonlight, Irmina picked out the angry glimmer in his eyes and the clenching of his hands near the axe on his hip.

Rawbone shifted closer, reaching out and grabbing her reins. "Look here, lil miss. I'll have none of your lip. Now, move it or lose it."

"Lose it." Irmina drew her sword and relieved the man of the hand still holding her reins.

Blood painted the silvery snow red, its warmth throwing up steam. The severed hand, now in a half-closed fist, fell to the ground. The man yowled and snatched at his stump.

Snarling, its bone hackles snapping up into knife sharp edges, his daggerpaw launched itself at her.

Irmina opened her Matersense, seized essences of air, and stopped the animal in mid flight. The daggerpaw hung suspended in the cushiony strands she Forged. A wave of her hand sent the creature

flying fifteen feet into a snowy mound.

Her sword point was at Rawbone's throat before he managed to move. "Call off your pet." She nodded toward where the daggerpaw was clambering to its feet.

Squeezing his arm above the wrist, the man said a few guttural words. The daggerpaw shrank back, but its gaze glowed with vehemence.

Irmina gave a nod of satisfaction then surveyed the clansmen arrayed around her. As she expected none of them had attempted to help or interfere in a one on one fight. Not yet. But the scowls and hands tightening around weapons said any one of them might wish to challenge her on their own. After all, she was a weak lowlander and a woman. Why would one of the mountain men need assistance to teach her a lesson? Pride could be anyone's undoing. "I don't take kindly to threats. Now, any of you move, and I'll give him another mouth to yap out of."

The men remained still. None uttered a word, but their eyes and the weapons in their hands spoke in volumes of violence. Irmina's horse snorted.

"That includes you," Irmina said to a man trying to sneak from her blind side.

The whisper of his feet on snow ceased.

"Now," she said, "until over a year and a half ago, Eldanhill used to be home. It never had a wall, and your kind stuck to the mountains. Why are the Nema and Seifer not only here in the lowlands but working together?"

No one spoke. The wounded man moaned.

"You can answer now."

"T-Tings have ch-changed, miss," Rawbone said between clenched teeth.

"Oh?"

"D-Dey can tell you what h-happen w-when dey get here." Rawbone nodded toward Eldanhill's wall.

A sally gate opened to reveal several forms illuminated by the backdrop of torchlight. One of them mounted, pulled a hood over their head, and kicked the horse into a trot.

"P-please, miss." Rawbone tried his best not to sag onto her sword point. "Let dem h-help me. I swear no one w-will a-attack you." Eyes wide, he licked his lips.

Nodding, Irmina eased her blade from his throat. "Help him."

With a moan, Rawbone collapsed to one knee and stuck the end of his stump into the snow. Uncertain glances passed between the clansmen before several of them rushed to his side and began fussing over him.

Irmina kept her gaze between the approaching rider and the remainder of the men. Those who weren't assisting Rawbone stood watch. Their daggerpaws and wolves crouched, heads down, muscles tense, held back only by handfuls of fur in straining hands.

As the rider drew closer, the wind picked up, whipping powdery residue sideways, but Irmina resisted the urge to pull her cloak tighter around her. She held her sword casually to one side, wondering which of Eldanhill's Council had been sent out. She pictured the surprise on their face when they recognized her.

The cloaked rider reached within a few feet, and Irmina frowned. The person was smaller than any Council member she remembered, even shorter than she was.

The clansmen dropped to one knee and bowed.

Brow puckered, Irmina glanced from the clansmen to the newcomer. The person slowed to a walk, handling the horse's reins expertly. The form stopped and threw back the cloak's hood.

"Teacher Galiana Calestis?" Irmina exclaimed.

Face haggard, the woman appeared frail compared to the vibrant person she remembered. "I have been expecting you, Ashishin Irmina." The wind fluttered Galiana's cloak out behind her.

Irmina gasped at the uniform she saw below the cloak and the insignia glinting on Galiana's breast. The green colors and the Setian Quaking Forest. Her grip on her sword tightened until her hand trembled.

Chapter 12

Back bent as she rode, Shin Galiana noted Irmina's reactions to the soldiers. Irmina's eyes merely narrowed at the Dosteri troops, but at the sight of the Setian colors, her hand drifted to her sword. When she realized, she fidgeted with her reins and quickly shifted her hand while glancing in Galiana's direction. Galiana pretended not to notice.

"I heard rumors of this within the Iluminus, of Sendeth having risen against the Tribunal." Irmina stared straight ahead, pointedly ignoring the patrolling soldiers as their boots squished along the slush-filled and torchlit roads. "I must say, I'm surprised. I thought Eldanhill would remain loyal if for no other reason than the Mystera's influence."

"We are loyal."

"To who?"

"Our heritage," said Galiana, her voice soft as she kept a hand on her staff. "Loyal to who we are. To what was taken away from us."

Irmina flinched at those words, color rising in her cheeks. "What of the things the Setian took from others? The countless lives …"

"Everyone has lost someone at some point." Galiana meant her words as reassurance, but Irmina squeezed her eyes shut. "Some more than others. Our reactions in the face of extremes, of grief, of terror, of rage, of elation are what shape us."

A deep breath escaped Irmina. "Indeed. I'm sure Aunt Jillian would agree. Where is she anyway?" Her eyes were as cold as the icicles hanging from the eaves or stony corners of parapets on the buildings around them.

Galiana heaved a sigh, and in spite of her furs, she shivered. "She went off to escort some of our own to safety."

"By the orders of the Dorns, no doubt." The bitterness in her tone was clear. "Wait, I forgot, there's only one Dorn left now."

A hair from telling her that Ancel was a Dorn despite how she felt, Galiana kept quiet instead. Whether her Aunt Jillian told Irmina or if she discovered the Dorns' identities on her own made no difference. Irmina knew. Why she had left so abruptly and why High Shin Jerem insisted on her traveling to Ostania made sense now. Time to heal, to decide, to make allegiances. But on whose side was she? From all reports, Irmina belonged to the Tribunal and in turn to the Exalted. What game was Jerem playing at? Irmina should have the Setian cause at heart regardless. The Dorns had no choice when they destroyed her family. The blame for what happened to the Nagels fell on Nerian's shoulders and their own for turning to the shade.

Added to all this was the stranger, Ryne. A self-proclaimed

Eztezian. How much of what the man had said could she believe? For most of her life, she'd researched and followed the Chronicles, using their prophecies and recordings as a guide to hopefully see a better future. Not everything within them had come to pass, but enough happened for her to believe some semblance of truth, of an ability to foretell, existed within those pages and the men and women who wrote them. Discerning what was worth pursuing was indeed the hard part. Not only were the words within them open to interpretation, but the Chronicles she read laid out conflicting paths.

According to her experience, dating back to when the original Iluminus split only to reform under the Ashishin, the events foretold by the Chroniclers bore a near uncanny resemblance to what transpired. At times, they did not. However, this only led her to believe in the different threads of destiny, altered fates, some of which were beyond prediction. If only she had managed to obtain every one of the Tomes. She let out a sigh. A million questions ran through her mind to ask Ryne, but she wondered just how much truth would be in his answers.

Despite all she had seen and the many changes she achieved due to the information deciphered from their pages, there was one thing Jerem always said that stuck in her mind. *'No man's fate is decided beforehand. People and paths change and destiny is nothing more than a choice here or there and a chance for some philosopher to say I told you so.'* However, his own words did not deter him from using the very same Chronicles.

Too much was happening too fast, but no way existed to slow time's progress. She would deal with each new issue as she thought best.

"There is much I need to tell you," Galiana said at last when they approached the entrance to the Whitewater Inn.

"Would any of it make a difference?"

"Sometimes the truth we see is not the truth but what we want to see."

A stableman helped Galiana down from her mount. He passed her staff, and she took it gratefully. The promised warmth within the inn beckoned to her as Irmina dismounted with ease and led the way. Back bent, Galiana followed.

Irmina pushed open the door, and held it long enough for Galiana to enter. The inn's interior was a welcome respite to the frigid temperature outside. Lamps lit the foyer in reddish hues, the effect from painted shades covering each. Two tables and a long bench sat against one wall and directly across from it was the service desk. The tinkle of music and laughter drifted in from the closed doors across the hall.

Guthrie Bemelle's head rose from the table where he wolfed down a meal. His eyes widened, and his round jaws and hanging jowls stopped working. He pushed away from the table, his protruding belly bumping against its edge as he stood. "I–Irmina Nagel?" he sputtered, food showing in his mouth.

"Master Bemelle," Irmina said with a slight nod.

"It's Shin Irmina or Shin Nagel now," Galiana corrected. "According to which she prefers." A tightening of Irmina's hand brought a slight twitch to Galiana's lips.

"Shin Irmina will do."

The way the young woman covered her surprise with a smooth answer made Galiana tip her head. Well trained as she expected.

"I–I'm sorry," Guthrie said, smoothing his dirty apron. "Shin Irmina." He swallowed. "I'm guessing you're in need of a room?"

"Yes, unless someone wishes to take me to Jillian's home until she returns."

Guthrie glanced at Galiana then made a show of collecting his dish and cup from the table.

"Well?" Irmina's gaze shifted from Galiana to Guthrie.

"Your aunt will not be coming back," Galiana said. She'd wanted to wait to reveal this.

"So she finally had enough of your deceit then," Irmina said under her breath.

Guthrie's head snapped up. His glass clattered to the floor. In order to retrieve it, he needed to get down on his knees. Keeping the half-full plate in his hand made this even more difficult, but finally he managed to pick up the glass. He bowed several times to the two of them then waddled over to his desk and placed his dishes down. The next few moments he spent flipping through the pages of his log book, presumably looking for a room in which to place Irmina. Sweat beaded his forehead.

"In answer to what you said, and since you asked after her again …" Galiana shed her cloak and fur jacket and hung them on a rack near the door. "No. She volunteered to escort the children, the elderly, and those who did not wish to be here, to safety in Torandil."

"I doubt that'll be far enough for any of you," Irmina said.

"One moment, Shin Galiana, Shin Irmina," Guthrie said. "Rolt!" he yelled.

Galiana noted the lack of Irmina's reaction to Guthrie referring to her as an Ashishin instead of a Teacher.

A muffled answer issued from somewhere past the wide door beyond the foyer.

"Get in here. Now!"

Guthrie's interruption to call for his nighttime helper broke some

of the tension. Galiana nodded her gratitude to the innkeeper, and he responded in kind.

The interior door opened and Rolt shuffled in. He hurried over to them, dipping his head continuously as he took Irmina's fur-lined overcoat and hung it on the rack.

"Take them to the suite," Guthrie said. "Also, don't forget to clean up the mess from their boots when you're done. Then head to … Master Rowan's stables?" Galiana nodded and he continued, "To collect her things from her horse. Oh, and tell Selise to prepare the dinner special. I'm sure Shin Irmina must be hungry."

Rolt's head bobbed even harder to the pronouncement of Irmina's title. "This way Shin Irmina, Shin Galiana." He led them across the polished wood floors and into the next room.

They entered the serving hall. Several heads shifted in their direction. Within moments, the laughter and music within drifted to silence. Chairs scraped as the patrons stood. Bows and the murmurs of Blessed Shin followed. This time, Irmina's eyebrow arched, but she said nothing.

Rolt shuffled over in his bent back walk and made his way to a pretty, blond serving girl. He whispered in her ear. With each word, her eyes grew wider and wider. When he finished, she hurried over to Miss Carina, the cook, and passed on instructions. Miss Carina's reaction was to look at Irmina, shake her head in disapproval, and walk toward the kitchen.

When Rolt returned, he led them up the four flights of stairs to the suite on the top floor. Below them, the music and laughter resumed. Rolt treated them as if they'd never been in the Whitewater Inn before, showing them the large bed, the sitting room, and the enamel bath tub, all the while mentioning the softness and warmth of the carpet beneath their feet in comparison to the cold, hardness of the polished wood floors. Lastly, he pointed out the windows and the sweeping view of Eldanhill's eastern side, the Kelvore River, its namesake mountains and the mists that hid the towering Whitewater Falls.

Galiana thanked Rolt and escorted him out. She turned from the closed door, to find Irmina staring at her, jaws grinding.

"How could you have allowed it all to happen?"

Shoulders sagging, Galiana sighed. Only one topic could cause the combination of pain and anger written on Irmina's face. "We did what we could to stop Nerian."

"No," Irmina said, "no excuses. Yes, Nerian gave the original orders to kill my family, but the Dorns didn't have to carry out the command. Why did they still continue even years after Nerian was gone? Why take my parents from me? Why?" Tears welled up in her

eyes.

Mouth agape, Galiana forgot to lean on her staff. She stood straight and stiff and the gnarled wood fell from her fingers.

Irmina's eyes became flinty pinpoints and a sneer twisted her otherwise beautiful features. "Yes," she hissed. "I know all about them and you. You did nothing to help. Neither did the other council members." Her voice rose. "You," she pointed, "are as guilty as Nerian for the lives he took." Her body trembled with those last words. A tear trickled down one cheek. "To make it worse, you let the Dorns take me in," she whispered, "raise me as their own while I grieved for my parents. The very ones who had them killed. I–I grew to love them as I once loved my own mother and father. Then they had Ancel, and … and …"

Galiana wanted to go to her, to console her, hug her. *Poor child, how you must have suffered, losing not one love but three.*

"You were supposed to be an Ashishin." Irmina wiped the tears away, and her face grew blank. She spoke with a level tone, emotionless as a brick. "A guiding light out from the darkness, a servant to those in need, but you spread as much or more evil and death as Nerian. You allowed the Dorns to take all from me that ever mattered. How many years have you led people down your own path, used Manipulation on them? Centuries?

"Yes. I'm aware of that too. Your Forging with the kinai. How the council extends their lives so they can continue to live while my family and countless others have perished. How you use the wine and the juice especially at Soltide to infuse people across the land with sela essences. Then you leech that power from them. I've tapped into it once, felt it ripple through me. The Streamean temple is more than a temple isn't it? The same as the Mysteras are more than schools. They are the focal points for your Forge. Great *divya* from which you tap into the pool of life within sela essences to extend your own existence."

Galiana stumbled to the bed and sat. By the gods, Irmina knew so much, but from her accusing eyes, she lacked what she needed: the true reasons behind the council's decisions.

Shin Irmina continued. "Now, you should also know the Tribunal is aware of your actions." A mirthless smile split her lips.

"Poor child," Galiana said gently. "The Tribunal has always known, Raijin Irmina." The young woman sucked in a breath. "It's why we still live. Why they allowed the Setian to live. They placed us here in Eldanhill. They allowed us to open all the other Mysteras."

"Y-You lie."

Galiana didn't know if to laugh, feel pity or be angry at her. "No need for me to lie now. We tried as best we could to save you and

many of the others from all this. Myself, the council, and the Dorns, chose to bear the brunt of what had to be done for our people survive. As an Ashishin, you've impersonated a Devout, spread the word of Streamean worship with promises of safe haven and prosperity in Granadia. All the while you scouted those villages and sent back word to the Tribunal."

Shock still written on her face, Irmina nodded numbly.

"Those towns and villages in Ostania were plundered for the wealth of sela available there. The Ashishin and Devout were the spearheads of the Tribunal's raids against Ostania. Oh, the actual attackers would be bandits, slavers, or members of one kingdom attacking another, but they served one purpose. To kill. In each instance, Tribunal leaders and the Exalted were there to reap the benefits of the deaths. To take sela and use it to extend their own lives."

"That cannot be," Irmina whispered, but from the look in her eyes, Galiana suspected the woman realized the truth of her words.

"The Setian people were one such, but we had more than sela. We possessed the Forging using kinai you mentioned. We did not need to take lives to extend our own. One among us had a Gift. As your Gift is being a beasttamer, Thania Dorn's Gift was to be one of the few Matii able to Forge sela itself."

"Thania? Forging sela? But that's supposed to be near impossible. One would have to be as strong as one of the Exalted to …" Her eyes shot open as she understood her implication.

"Yes. She is or was. And it seems much of her power passed to her son."

"Ancel?"

"The Tribunal members are not the only ones who sought the power we had. So did Amuni's followers. They needed the Gift to continue in their search for a way to break or weaken the seals on the Nether. To allow their kind to breach the Kassite's wards, cross over from Hydae and envelop our lands. With promises of power and returning Ostania to its former glory, they convinced Nerian to side with them. Others were corrupted by those promises and the first taste of power they received. Many from within your family."

"No," Irmina whispered. "No … No … No, that's not true. My family, my parents were not of the shade."

"Some were not," Galiana said. "After the first few were revealed, starting with your ancestor Garrick Nagel, there was no stopping the retaliation. We possessed limited ways in which to tell who were shadelings and who were not. Word reached those opposing Nerian and much of your family perished. Others who were pure and refused the Shadowbearer, he had them executed. He blamed those killings on

Stefan and his men because they rebelled. Indeed, Stefan did give the order to have your parents killed, but only after the shade's influence turned them. They helped plot attacks on Ostanian towns. When we discovered they knew where in Granadia we'd fled to, we were forced to act."

Galiana allowed silence to settle over the room then, giving Irmina a chance to ponder her words. She could imagine the woman's life flitting before her eyes as she remembered all she'd been through. Whether she would recognize the truth was another story. For both their sakes, Galiana hoped she did. She would hate to have to kill Irmina.

Finally, Irmina said, "What's High Shin Jerem's part in all this."

The question took Galiana by surprise, but she smiled all the same. Except for the trail from the earlier tears, Irmina's face was now serene. She exhibited rare emotional control for so young a Matus.

"Well?"

"High Shin Jerem is one of us. He is Setian."

"Why didn't he tell me? I'm loyal to him. I've always been." The hurt on Irmina's face was plain.

Galiana shrugged. "Who knows?" She could only guess at the conflict warring with Irmina. "Jerem is as mysterious to me sometimes as he appears to you and just as confusing. I have not heard from him since he informed me you would be on your way here."

Irmina's brow furrowed. "Did he say why?"

"No. All he said was to prepare myself to receive you at some point."

"That's like him too. Hints of guidance without saying exactly what he wishes," Irmina sighed. "What's with the Dosteri and the mountain clans? No one mentioned them in all this confusion with Sendeth, Barson, and whomever else rising against the Tribunal."

"Their presence is still a mystery to me," Galiana admitted. "It was Stefan's doing. He apparently owed a debt to the Dosteri." Now wasn't a good time to mention what the Chronicles said about them. "How or why he has not said. The mountain tribes needed little excuse to attack the Sendethi army. One of its Knight Captains decided to make demands in the name of the king."

"Did they allow him to keep his head?"

"They were too embroiled in one of their feuds at the time to turn their attentions on him. However, when they found shadelings within the Greenleaf Woods, they were more than willing to help. Soon after came the battle for Eldanhill. The man in command of the shade also controlled the Sendethi, but that is not the worst of it." Galiana took a deep breath. "As strong as Thania was, he defeated her. He took her and Materialized. We have no idea where they went."

“Yes, I heard. How’s Stefan and Ancel taking it?”

“Not well. Stefan is bad enough. Ancel is worse. He already was not handling your departure well. In some ways, this crisis saved him from the pain you two had. It was either get over you or die. You see, the shade was also hunting Ancel.”

Irmina clasped her hands on her lap. “Hunting him? Why?”

“For his mother’s power, but that is not all,” Galiana added. “He is so strong a netherling breached the Kassite and crossed over to our world. It imbued something into Ancel. Strange tattoos covering one arm and part of his chest.”

“Ryne!” Irmina exclaimed.

Galiana opened her mouth then snapped it shut.

Chapter 13

Across the area now free of snow and slush, Ancel tapped his foot impatiently. He'd wanted to use one of the other training spaces, but the bushy-faced giant opposite him insisted on clearing his own, stating he needed the work to warm his body. How did someone warm themselves in tight leathers with their arms exposed? In this weather?

Almost every Weaponmaster and student had stopped their sessions to crowd around the training area. Most hunkered down within thick furs and cloaks, their hushed murmurs spreading through the gathering, quiet anticipation hanging in the air. Ancel wished Galiana or his father was present, but another matter had their attention. Some Ashishin had showed up the previous night, and the council gathered in discussions with her.

"Whenever you're ready," Ryne called out.

The spectators quieted.

Wooden longsword held before him, Ancel began to circle Ryne with smooth, sure strides. Battle energy ran through him in warm tingles as he moved. One foot stepped next to the other but never overlapped. Underneath his thick leather armor, the life-like sculpted pendant of his mother rested flat against his chest. He wished she could be here also. Ancel took a breath, trying to push away both the thought and the accompanying emotional surge. He sought the Eye, embracing its calmness.

"Ah, so you know how to find the Shunyata. Good." Unconcernedly, Ryne flipped a wooden replica of a greatsword from hand to hand, the weapon more like a twig in his grasp.

Ancel's heart skipped a beat at the name. Kachien used the same word to describe a similar skill among her people. Hands steady as he circled, he fixed his gaze over his weapon's tip and upon his opponent, hoping to imitate Ryne's calm disposition.

Two more steps to the right, and Ancel changed direction. Muddy earth squelched beneath his feet. He braced himself, focusing on Ryne's chest in a fruitless effort to ignore the artwork on the man's thick, oak-branch arms. Without warning, those Etchings shifted. Ancel gave in to his battle energy and darted in, attacking with a three-strike move.

As he parried the first two blows, Ryne's eyes widened. The contact vibrated through Ancel's hands as Ryne dropped backward, his body arched a foot or two above the ground, but neither sword nor hand touching the soggy, rust-colored dirt. The maneuver seemed impossible for a man so large.

The third blow, aimed for Ryne's torso, whiffed through empty air. Ryne sprung up as the slice passed by, propelling his body over Ancel in a graceful flip.

Off balance, Ancel attempted to pivot, but his knee twisted under him. He stumbled forward. Before he fell, he jarred to a stop.

Ryne's iron fingers dug into his bare shoulder and held him upright. The greatsword tapped Ancel's neck.

Gasps and a smattering of claps burst from the throng.

"I saw your move," Ancel said, breathing hard but still beaming with pride as Ryne released him.

Ryne shook his head and wagged a finger thicker than two of Ancel's. "Seeing the move isn't enough. Find a way to counter."

Ancel nodded.

They assumed identical positions and began anew. This time Ancel attacked swiftly, alternating blows from every position, going through the basics to the more advanced Styles his father had taught him over the past months. Not once did he pierce Ryne's guard or come close to touching him. Each time the fight ended with a gentle tap of Ryne's sword. Sweating profusely despite the cold, chest, legs, and arms burning, Ancel almost went down on one knee. Ryne called for a halt.

This time, the applause was resounding. Excited chatter rose from students and Weaponmasters alike in an incomprehensible din.

"Not bad, but you try too much for speed." Ryne strode to his side. "It makes your moves rigid and predictable. Breathe, relax. Allow your attacks to flow." Ryne acted out the breathing exercise. "Don't let your excitement show. Remember. Your body reflects your intentions."

Ancel winced. "But … but," he began.

Ryne's upheld hand stopped him. "Think of your Stances. They represent the three elements and their essences within Mater. The Flows," he announced, "Light as the wind." Ryne shifted, took several steps back, and then glided forward, barely touching the ground, his huge feet leaving not a mark in the mud. "Flowing like water." Ryne's sword arm swayed in a slow, seductive dance.

"The Forms. Strong as the earth." This time when Ryne swept away, his boot imprints crushed the earth beneath him. He spun and struck down, shattering a rock. Gasps rose from all around. "Pliable as wood, malleable as metal." Bending and contorting into impossible positions brought more breathless noises from those in attendance.

"The Streams-the powerful energy that is heat and cold-able to strike or stop with force and fury." Alternating breezes from Ryne's strikes, first heated, then freezing cold, brushed Ancel despite where he stood several feet away. "The stealth of shade." At those words,

protests sounded from several, but Ryne ignored them. When Ryne imitated the slices and cuts, Ancel failed to discern where the attacks originated, nor did he hear or feel the man's footsteps. "The speed of light," Ryne said, his hands becoming a blur, a storm of movement so intricate Ancel was unable to track them.

A thunderous ovation followed. Ryne bowed to the onlookers then to Ancel.

"I've trained hard most of my life," Ancel admitted, "but I can't imagine fighting like you. Not even the Weaponmasters can."

'The Etchings will help guide you. You can call on them without touching Mater. It's important to remember that, but don't rely on them or on Mater itself. Training, preparation, and anticipation are everything. Hard work combined with skill is near unbeatable."

"When will you teach me to Forge while using the Etchings?"

"You wish to swim without knowing how rough the sea is. To defeat the enemies you're bound to face, your skill and knowledge needs to grow. Nurture them. For today, we're done."

The crowds began to drift away as they realized no more was forthcoming. Several Weaponmasters stayed behind, signaling to Ryne. He strode over to them, a few words passed, and they too left, some appearing more disappointed than others.

"Come," Ryne said when he returned, "walk with me."

Ancel followed Ryne out of the training area. They placed their training swords in the rack built alongside the open space and covered them with a tarp. Students and Teachers pointed or murmured to each other as they passed. As tall as he was in comparison to everyone else, Ancel felt like a child next to Ryne, his head reaching level with his mentor's chest. Snow squelching under their feet, they strode along Learner's Row and the many sandstone buildings.

"There's more to the Etchings than the sword or Mater." Ryne clasped his hands behind his back. "But I needed to know how far along you were. Specifically, I wanted to see how easily you entered and maintained the Shunyata or the Eye of the Storm as your people call it. You did well. And I don't readily give praise."

Ancel's chest swelled at the compliment. "Thank you. I practiced with my father and another friend of mine who taught me the Ostanian name for the Eye."

"Really? Who?"

"A woman named Kachien. She helped keep me safe when the shade was hunting me."

"Hmm." Ryne nodded. "You need to introduce me one day. I noticed how you empty yourself within the Eye, but that's not all there is to it. The essences are as much a part of the elements as they are connected to your feelings. Heat to anger and passion, cold to

emptiness, air to levity and so forth. Within the Shun-the Eye, you must be able to pluck each emotion as you need and use them."

"Why?"

"Your feelings enhance your power. Think of how a burst of adrenaline gives you energy or how a man in desperation can perform amazing feats. Using your emotions give the same effect."

Ancel nodded his understanding.

"A person's strength and affinity in Mater is dictated by not only his bloodline, but by experience, personality, and practice," Ryne said. "In time, one born strong in a certain essence can learn to master others as he develops. After all, it often takes more than one essence from different elements when Forging. For example, liquid plus energy makes a solid." A bit confused, Ancel frowned. "In easier terms, water and cold create ice, which is a part of the Forms. Reverse that process, apply energy-the Streams, namely heat-to ice to form a liquid-the Flows. Most, if not all things, need the energy of the Streams. Take that away and it reverts to its baser components.

"Remember, Forging works best on something already in existence with a source to draw upon, like taking heat from a flame to create a fireball. Or the charge from a storm to release a lightning strike. Within a flood or a raging river is another form of energy that could be used, generated by movement. This you could apply to speed. This intermingling is because of the nature of the elements themselves."

"What do you mean?"

"The essences are living beings. They adapt as you do."

Ancel gaped. He recalled Kachien's warning of something similar. And when his father lay dying and his mother was threatened, he was certain he'd heard voices whispering to him. Since then, they had increased, growing stronger at times, often corresponding to his emotional state. He sensed the power behind him. It scared him. Automatically, he'd resorted to what he'd been taught, making sure to be in the Eye if he Forged. At times, he dismissed the voices as a fancy or maybe the effect wielding Mater could have on one's sanity.

"Your expression says you experienced their ability to communicate."

Ancel hesitated to answer. Finally, he said, "I–I have. When I allowed my emotions to get the better of me, I heard those voices. They promised power. Unending power."

"Did you accept their offer?"

"Twice."

Ryne stopped. His emerald eyes glinted like two polished gems. "Did you take a life when you gained the power?" His voice was hard enough to match his gaze.

“No. Twice I used the power to try save my parents, but both times I called upon it I was interrupted. The first time Shin Galiana stopped me, and the second time, the netherling came.”

A relieved whoosh left Ryne’s lips. “Good. Remember this, if you remember nothing else: here in Denestia, anytime you accept their power and do an actual Forge, you must remain within the Eye. Most Matii have either forgotten or refuse to believe the essences are alive. Many have accepted what they experience as a side effect of wielding the power they have, a warning, if you will, that the madness from touching Mater exists.”

“Can the essences harm me?”

“With direct physical contact? No.” Ryne resumed his walk. “Mentally, they can destroy you. They push you emotionally as well as feed on sela, yours or whatever you kill when under their influence. To avoid being driven insane, you *must* kill when you accept *and* complete a Forging using their power.”

Ancel frowned. “Unless I missed something, you were just glad I didn’t kill when I used the power, but now you say I must kill when I take it or I go mad.”

“Correct, but as you said, you didn’t complete those Forges. A fine distinction but one to be remembered.” Ryne paused. “Your mind and sela are connected as one. To appease them and replenish your own power, you must kill. The act of Forging takes a piece of your sela. Add what they bestow, and it takes more. Only a death can partially replace what they took. With too much sela gone, your mind lacks coherence, and eventually you drift into insanity. Continue to Forge and your sela depletes so much, your body can longer sustain itself.

“In the same connection, the essences leech on your strongest emotions to boost their strength. Your only protection is control. The Eye offers that by limiting the effect the essences have on your mind. You can then safely alter the amount of sela and emotions you feed them. It’s a precarious balance, but be warned, once you’ve broken the cycle, by Forging outside the Eye’s influence, there’s no return.”

“Why not simply refuse to feed them but take their power anyway?”

“The results of not feeding are detrimental to you and them. Not only do you still go insane, but they lose a part of themselves forever, a part that cannot be regained. The only time that changes is when you Forge solely using your Etchings. The effect is lessened but it has its own drawbacks, ones not worth explaining right now.” Ryne gestured all around them. “For now, most of your Forges will be outside your Etchings. If you don’t feed the essences at some point soon after, then the world suffers. The fabric that holds all together unravels in miniscule amounts. It may not happen immediately, but

eventually, the effects show. The land become unstable, storms grow worse, all manner of disasters can occur. Think of Ostania's great thunderstorms. They are the result of such an imbalance, as are all manner of extraordinary creatures. The essences need us to live as much as we need them. This is what we call the Harmonies. You must learn to walk that edge or perish."

Ancel recalled where he read about the Harmonies. He recited the piece as if it were second nature.

"When comes the appointed hour,
Under the rule of the one with Etchings of Power,
Stone will crumble,
The void shall rumble,
Clouds will grow,
Water shall flow,
Light and shade as one,
Fire and ice as one,
Denestia shall bend to its knee,
Until the elements exist in Harmony."

This time, when Ryne stopped, his eyes were wide with wonder. "Where did you learn that?"

"The Chronicle of Undeath. My father owns a copy."

"Not a copy. There's only one such tome, and it cannot be copied."

"How would you know?" Ancel asked.

"I wrote it, and I Forged the wards that protect it."

"But it's said to be centuries or more old."

"Thousands, actually. In one of my many lives, I decided to write much of what I knew, much of my dreams. Many of the other Eztezians did the same. Bits of memory, dreams, histories, all within one Chronicle or another. Mine detailed sela in particular. I named the book Undeath because sela is neither living nor dead; it is both. Slain men and creatures stand up and walk due to its power."

"Can you teach me the rest of the Chronicle?"

"One day," Ryne said, "but be warned, the Chronicles are not always what they seem. Keep that in mind. More than one Matus claimed to know how to harness harmony. All of them died. In fact, I killed one myself.

"Now, back to the Eye. Hopefully, you have a clearer understanding of why you must remain under its influence when Forging. Even those not strong enough to communicate with the essences are still affected by them."

Ancel nodded. "That, I found out from Kachien also. It's the reason for the Pathfinders. They hunt whoever loses control."

"As much as I disagree with what they do, it's necessary," Ryne

said.

"Should I be in the Eye when I see auras around people?"

Ryne smiled. "I'm glad you asked. No. Since you're new to your power, they may appear now at either extreme of emotion, but eventually they'll be as natural as breathing and always with you. They're different for those who can sense them. I couldn't begin to tell you how to discern who means well from who means harm. You learn that on your own."

"I already have," Ancel said.

"Very good. One thing to consider is that the auras are more than just signs to tell of a thing's intentions. The same way your body and mind are conduits so additional Mater can pass into you, there must be something to keep the essences in. To store them. A Matii's aura does that. A strong enough aura prevents Mater from leaving. Forgers eventually learn to manipulate that storage. It's what limits your power normally. You can't just draw on the essences and use them. They must pass through you first into the same pool you use for the Eye."

Ancel nodded. "So if we're as strong as you say how is it that we can't defeat the Skadwaz once and for all?"

"In ways,' Ryne said, "they are our opposites, Matii enhanced by Amuni to combat our Etchings. They possess their own way of wielding Mater, at times better than we do."

Ancel found the revelation difficult to fathom. "How's that possible?"

"Because they were made with a closer connection to the shade than humanly possible. I doubt I could consider them human or even of the Nether. Like the world Amuni created for them, they fall somewhere between."

Ancel took it all in before asking, "Ryne?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever Forged outside of the Eye?"

"Yes. Many times."

Ancel was speechless. First, Kachien and her suffering at the whim and need of the essences, and then losing his mother. Now, Ryne. How cruel could life be? He embraced his Matersense and waited. But no voices echoed in his head with promises of power. *I don't care how long it takes me, I'll find a way to master you, every single one of you.*

A whisper rose then, but instead of words, he swore he heard brushes of mocking laughter.

"I shall be blunt with you," Ryne said, breaking Ancel from his thoughts. "There may come a time you will be tempted to do the same. In those cases, always draw on your Etchings first. Right now,

you worry about shadelings, daemons, maybe even the Skadwaz, but there are far worse things that walk world."

Chapter 14

Ryne walked alongside his ward in silence, shortening his steps so he would not outpace the young man. Ancel's lack of response to his revelation said he understood the implications. Ryne let out a breath. When he'd recited the Tenets and Principles, and unleashed the Etching of the Guardians to save Castere, he broke the seal keeping Denestia's essences at bay. In turn, his actions resumed the effects of his impending madness. The process was irreversible.

Bertram, or Voliny, as he called himself, had given him little choice. The man had been an Eztezian. Bertram's history trance proved as much. Now, he was dead. Another Eztezian dead. One more guardian gone. Ryne shook his head in resignation.

Who held such power as to be able to control one such as himself and Bertram? Surely, it could not be a Skadwaz. A netherling maybe, but that helped prove the contract no longer bound them.

Did the Nine finally walk the land? He frowned. For millennia, there had been factions among the netherlings: those in support of the gods' release, those who thought man should govern themselves, and those who sought to become gods. The latter was the Nine. The major battles between them had always remained in the Nether and Hydae, while they manipulated people to do their bidding. Until now, it appeared. Although Ancel had unleashed the power gathered by their use of the Iluminus sects and constant war, the essences still weren't strong enough to usurp the gods. Not yet. Still, at the rate events were spiraling, not many stood between the Nine and their advent into Denestia, if one or two of them weren't here already.

Unless he missed his count, only eight of the original Eztezians remained, all with the knowledge Ancel required to master his Etchings. Eight where hundreds once lived. All that remained of those who knew the truth about the Chronicles, who had the power to make a difference in the wars to come. Locating them weren't his greatest worry. From what he felt of them, they still kept to their old haunts, although several appeared to be heading north. If time allowed, Ancel would learn their exact locations, but time always had its own agenda. To complicate the situation even more, convincing them to unseal themselves and help Ancel would be near impossible.

That was still better than the alternative. If any of the Eztezians died or refused Ancel, only two other methods existed to obtain the necessary training. Both came with great risks. In one, the boy would need to find a way to breach the Kassite and cross realms into the Nether. All his research pointed to few outside the gods, the netherlings, and the primordial chaos of the beings inhabiting Mater

itself, surviving such a trip. The task also involved shattering the weakened seals on the Nether. An option, but not a viable one, at least not one in which he was willing to participate. Precious little survived the last time the world faced the war such an act unleashed. He wanted no part in being a cause for such destruction as his ancestors had wrought. On his own, he'd sown enough chaos and suffering.

The second method might be even worse than the Nether. Ancel would need to pass between realms to Antonjur-the gods' home of old. The mere thought of the place made him cringe.

Trying to clear his head, he took in the town of Eldanhill as the people went about their business oblivious to the impending changes in the world. Students as well as retired Ashishin strode down one side of Learner's Row on their way to classes. Those aspiring to become Dagodin practiced under the watchful eyes of Weaponmasters. Novices and others further along in Materforging drilled in open practice areas. The rhythmic ring of steel on steel and the clack of wooden practice swords mingled with the boom and rumble of Forges and the synchronized shouts of unarmed combat. Multiple halls that contained one class or another, teaching everything from alchemy, apothecary, language arts, to mathematics, were filled to bursting.

The Mystera reminded him of the Iluminus but on a smaller scale. How many such schools existed? His chest swelled with the advancement his people had made. At the same time, his heart hurt over the misery he'd inflicted on them. He inhaled deeply. *What's done is done. Not even the gods can turn back time.* A spicy aroma wafted to him, and his stomach growled.

"I just realized," he said, glancing down to Ancel, "it's been a long time since I ate."

Ancel beamed, the expression making the stubble on his chin appear out of place. "Follow me."

They continued down Learner's Row before turning off onto one of the smaller streets and into a crowded open market. Criers and people haggling prices with vendors filled the plaza with the song of life. Sweaty bodies, perfumes, cooked foods, raw meats, and fruits created a melange of odors. After his lonely months' long trek from southern Granadia to this far north, Ryne reveled in the sweet music of the populace. Even the stench from nearby drains was almost enjoyable. Most townsfolk cleared a way for his giant form, some gracing him with everything from curious glances to open-mouthed stares. He smiled.

"Ryne," Ancel said, "how did you find me?"

"Through the link. When a person receives their first Etching, every Eztezian senses his pull. Some more than others. Whether we choose to answer is another story. For some of us, there's no choice."

"Why?"

"The bond is that strong. In the Chronicle of Time, one of the others wrote that denying the call is like resisting the water in the ocean. You can only hold out for so long before the current sweeps you under. The power you used when you summoned the netherling saved me." Ryne shuddered as he thought about his encounter with Voliny. "Even if I didn't want to come, the power drove me. I chased where it led, through snows and storms, letting nothing stand in my way, killing if I had to. I went weeks on end without eating. When I reached you in the woods, the call ceased."

"I understand feeling the link, but Da said you already knew my name. How?"

"Let's just say a voice told me."

"The essences?" Ancel asked.

"Maybe." Ryne shrugged. He still wasn't certain about the voice, or rather, the sense deep inside his mind that pointed to Ancel and revealed his name. When the connection to the swath of Mater occurred in Castere, he immediately understood it originated from the young man. The urgency driving him afterwards may have been his own consciousness or it may have been Mater.

From the market, Ancel led them onto an even wider road lined with brick and sandstone buildings, their tiled roofs either peaking up or sloping down. The avenue lacked the crush of shoppers and traders, but travelers still crowded the thoroughfare, huddled in everything from thick furs, leathers, layered swaths of cloth, and cloaks. Those who didn't walk rode horses. Covered wagons and animal-drawn coaches trundled along, wheels kicking up muddy water along a street too busy for the snow to accumulate. A few men kept a ten-mule team on course as they hauled a cart carrying large blocks of quarried stone. Among the crowds marched a few Dagodin, often on the heels of big-boned, bushy-faced men in lighter leathers or furs with daggerpaws or wolves at their sides. The pets eyed the people as an eagle might a rabbit.

While the majority of people were paler complexioned Granadians, Ryne noted what he'd picked up on in the market. Many here were of Ostanian descent. Thick-shoulders and sandy-hair were Harnan traits. Add a tad more color, square jaws, and blue eyes, and several of the taller folk would fit right in among the Felani. Sprinklings of red, flame, or jet-black hair marked those with Setian heritage. Bald heads with bushy beards and moustaches belonged to the Banai. None of them dressed like their distant relatives, but the resemblances existed nonetheless.

The wild men and soldiers in blue and gold held his attention. They bore subtle or sometimes stark differences in size, but the auras

about them told him they were of the same lineage. A race he thought he'd all but eliminated as Nerian the Shadowbearer during the war that sealed Stefan Dorn's rebellion against him. These men were all Erastonians, among some of the deadliest warriors next to the Setian Alzari.

The memory of Stefan made him feel at odds with himself again. Here he was, now the mentor of a young man whose father hated him above no other. A secret he needed to maintain if he hoped to complete his task. When Irmina arrived as she promised, he planned to plead with her not to reveal his identity.

"The voice that came to you," Ancel said, breaking their silence, "could it be the gods themselves touching the world?" He nodded toward the Streamean temple and its soaring clock tower dominating the town's center.

"Who knows?" Ryne stared off into the distance. "Personally, I've seen too much not to believe in divine interference."

"Do you think they hear our prayers?"

Ryne shrugged. "I have my suspicions, but that's all they are."

"I think they do," Ancel said.

"Why?" Ryne asked, genuinely interested. He wondered if this young man had arrived at the same conclusions in his short time of ascension as he had over years mired by the fog of lost memories.

Ancel glanced around furtively. "I get dizzy sometimes when I pray." His is voice lowered. "Ever since this power began to manifest. I experimented, but I can't pin down the reason. I'm convinced it isn't random. I think somehow my prayers are … answered."

Surprised, Ryne arched his eyebrow. He suspected the same, but more than that, Ancel's inquisitiveness and hunger for learning reminded him of Kahkon. A brief pang of regret for his inability to save Kahkon swept through him. It had been much the same with his own children. Unlike with Kahkon though, he'd put his own to the sword. Some in their youth and others when they'd lived a full life. Each one had been driven mad by the power they inherited. No matter how hard he beeged the gods, it made no difference. He often felt being an Eztezian was more a curse than a gift. Stripping themselves of the ability to bring children into the world had been the best choice they'd made.

"I'm uncertain what to think," Ancel said, "but the people who I prayed for the hardest always seem to find a way to safety."

"Coincidence?"

"I–I don't know. Is it still coincidence if it happens several times?"

"Well, it's possible," Ryne said, "but concrete proof is like chasing the wind. We know it's there but we can't capture it."

"Why are you smiling like that?"

Ryne chuckled. He hadn't realized he was smiling. "You remind me of a boy I knew, that's all. He was younger than you but always full of questions." Memories of Kahkon flooded him. He held on to the good ones and pushed the painful ones away.

"You miss him?"

"More so now than I ever realized," Ryne admitted. Stomach grumbling in earnest, he added. "How much farther is this place? I could eat a horse." He glanced longingly at one of the beasts.

When he noticed Ancel had stopped, he turned back. The boy's wide-eyed expression changed to a grimace.

"What?"

Ancel shook his head. "I always thought Ostanians eating horsemeat was a rumor."

"You don't?"

"No. It's … it's …"

"It tastes like deer," Ryne insisted. He couldn't help his smile when Ancel's face paled. "Some things taste disgusting. Horseflesh isn't one them, but I'll remember to keep those thoughts to myself when I'm here."

"You should be glad my friend Danvir isn't around," Ancel said. "He would've tried to gut you."

Ryne chuckled.

"We're here." Ancel stopped at a five-storied building with a sign displaying a gigantic waterfall. The Whitewater Inn, the sign declared.

Six stern-faced Dagodin stood outside. Gazes locked on the greatsword at his hip, their hands drifted to their weapons. Ryne ignored them but kept his hand away from his weapon.

"Master Dorn, the Council is still meeting inside." This from a Dagodin bearing the signet of a double set of crossed swords over a shield on the upper arm of his uniform. "We can't allow anyone in."

"Already I'm at a disadvantage," Ancel said. "You know my name, and I don't have a clue who you are. I make it my business to know every soldier's name from officer on down."

"I'm Knight Captain Steyn." The man stood more erect, chest puffed out in an upper body hewn from stone.

"Hmm." Ancel frowned then tapped a finger to his lips. He stopped as recognition crossed his face. "You lead the new Dagodin cohort from Calisto."

The Knight Captain arched an eyebrow then nodded.

"Well, I understand your orders, Knight Captain Steyn, but the fact that the dining room is empty is exactly why I'm here. Not only am I starving, but could you picture me taking him," Ancel gestured to Ryne with a smile, "into one of the more crowded establishments?"

"I see your point," The Knight Captain looked Ryne up and down,

“but orders are orders. You’re going to have to eat elsewhere.”

“Knight Captain,” the smile disappeared from Ancel’s face, “this was my mother’s favorite place. I always eat here in her memory.”

“Sorry to hear that, son.” The Knight Captain’s eyes appeared sympathetic for a moment before they hardened. “But people die all the time. If I listened to every sap who came to me with a sob story, no disrespect intended to my commander’s son or his wife, I’d be stripped of my position and drawn and quartered.”

Ancel’s face became blank. Darkness flashed across his aura for a moment. His Etchings gave a telltale shift.

Ryne reached a hand out to restrain him. Too late.

Time slowed. Everything happened at once.

A door to the side opened. Several people streamed out. Hand stretching to Ancel, Ryne picked out Irmina among them. Openmouthed, she stared from him to Ancel and then to something behind them.

Ancel’s right hand shot up in a blur, striking the Knight Commander in the chest. The blow’s force flung Steyn from his feet. He crashed into the inn’s wide oak door and fell in a heap of armor.

A snarl twisting her features, Irmina reached for her sword, eyes focused on whatever was beyond Ryne.

Ryne whirled.

A few dozen feet away stood a slim, golden-haired woman. Her aura bloomed with a peculiar mix of light, shade, and earth essences. An aura he knew well. She’d been present when he found Kahkon, broken, bloody, and barely alive.

Beside her stood a creature bigger than the average horse. It appeared to be a daggerpaw, but its lack of an aura said the beast was not of this world.

A netherling.

The normal tingle of battle energy became a rushing torrent. Ryne snatched for his greatsword and charged.

Chapter 15

Stunned by the sight of Ryne and Ancel, but even more so by the golden-haired Ostanian woman, Irmina drew in Mater to Forge.

Humongous sword in hand, Ryne was loping down the Eldan Road in those ground-eating strides of his. Ancel stared slack-jawed at her.

The Ostanian woman stood with two black Alzari daggers bared. The weapons brought the pain of the attack by Jaecar, his wife, and their shadelings screaming into Irmina's memory. In front of the Ostanian, bone hackles raised into knives, Charra snarled.

"Stop!" Shin Galiana yelled.

Reluctantly, Irmina released the strands of her Forging. Along the road, people were scattering in every direction. Soldiers among them had unsheathed their weapons. The Dagodin at the door surrounded Ancel. Their Knight Captain lay in a boneless heap.

From behind Irmina, steel rasped on leather. Stefan bulled his way next to her and Galiana. He opened his mouth to speak.

"In Ilumni's name. I. Said. STOP!" Galiana's voice boomed unnaturally. The sound became a howling gale that flapped cloaks and rattled shutters and wind vanes.

Stefan's mouth snapped shut. The soldiers froze.

Ryne kept going. He leapt into the air, sword swinging down toward the Ostanian woman.

Charra roared.

A seething mass of blue-tinged Mater shot up between Ryne and the daggerpaw.

Ryne's body slammed into the elements with a resounding thud as if he struck a steel wall. For a moment, the surface dimmed, bent in on itself, and then rebounded. The effect blasted him back through the air, but instead of falling, Ryne twisted in a somersault. He landed lightly on his feet like some acrobatic dancer. Sword held crossways before him, muscles straining, face a livid mask, he stared at Charra.

Irmina spun on Galiana. "Why would you use that much power here? You could have hurt …" Her voice trailed off at Galiana's shocked expression. Irmina's gaze immediately shifted to the daggerpaw. *Charra?* Her mouth hung open before she remembered to close it.

A moment passed that seemed to last forever before Galiana finally shook her head as if waking from a trance. "What, in the pits of Hydae, is going on here?" She strode out into the road until she stood between Ryne and the daggerpaw.

Irmina followed and spoke up as she tried her best not to glance

at Charra. “It’s her.” She nodded toward the golden-haired woman.

“You know Kachien, Shin Irmina?” Galiana asked.

Irmina avoided looking at Ancel at the mention of her title. “Yes, from a village in Ostania. Carnas, Ryne’s home before the shade massacred its people. She’s a killer, possibly an assassin.”

Several Dagodin reacted, placing themselves around the council members. A few started toward the woman.

“Of course she is,” Galiana said. “She’s also one of Jerem’s.”

Irmina noted how Ryne’s hand clenched his sword’s hilt even tighter.

“She’s also the one who saved Ancel’s life,” Galiana added.

An expression of grudging respect passed across Ryne’s face. He nodded to Kachien. Wordlessly, he sheathed his sword.

Irmina glanced from Ancel to Kachien. This woman was not only an agent of High Shin Jerem’s, but she’d saved Ancel’s life? A glint flashed in Kachien’s eyes, and Irmina frowned. Ancel hung his head for a moment before straightening his back. A tickle of something familiar about Kachien tugged at her. Her lips parted. Kachien reminded her of herself: the lithe frame, the honey-colored eyes, the attitude. All but the hair. Irmina faced Ancel. He met her gaze, eyes unwavering. Abruptly, she understood. He and Kachien had been intimate. Jealousy flashed through her in a hot wave.

“Are we still going to eat?” Ryne said in Ancel’s direction before she managed a word.

Ancel nodded. He inclined his head to Kachien, grimaced at Irmina, and then he stepped around the groaning Knight Captain into the inn.

Following not far behind, Ryne stopped at the doorway. He gave one long look at Kachien, bowed to Charra, and ducked inside.

Irmina still stared toward the door where they had disappeared.

“You two,” Galiana said, pointing to her and Kachien, “we need to talk.”

Kachien dipped her head. Irmina regarded the Ostanian with a frosty expression before finally doing the same.

“I’m going to make sure my son is well,” Stefan said.

“No.” Galiana waved him off. “What happened here is out of your hands. Please escort the elders to the barracks and wait for me.”

Stefan’s eyes took on a stubborn set for a moment. “Fine.” He sighed before he stalked off with the rest of the council in tow.

For a moment, Irmina wondered how much Stefan knew of his son’s relationship. Earlier, when he first entered the meeting, it had taken all her power not to strike at him. Even within the Eye her rage and craving for revenge had warred with her control. She had to remind herself of what Galiana had said and her talk with Jerem. If

the chance existed that she was wrong about the Dorns, and she still killed them, it would make her no different to what she thought of them.

Galiana bent to examine the Knight Captain. “His ego is more hurt than anything. Follow the council and see to it he gets some rest.”

The Dagodin bowed, gathered their officer, and marched off in the same direction as Stefan and the others.

With a last curious glance at Charra, Galiana said, “Shall we go inside?” She didn’t wait for their answer.

Irmina glanced over to where Kachien was speaking to the daggerpaw. She couldn’t make out the words, but the animal appeared to nod, before loping toward the back of the inn. Charra’s tongue lolled, teeth showing as he passed by her. Recognition glinted in those golden eyes. She almost reached out as she once did to touch the beast’s mind but recoiled at the thought. Unless she was mistaken, the animal had just Forged. Years ago, Charra had resisted her. What would he do now? Instinctively, she drew her cloak around her while keeping an eye on the daggerpaw until it disappeared behind the inn. Trying her best not to tense as Kachien passed her and strode inside, Irmina followed.

By the time she reached the dining hall, Shin Galiana was sitting across from Ancel. They’d drawn two tables together. Ryne sat on the polished wood floors with his legs crossed, the chair next to him looking like a plaything. Rolt was nodding to Ancel as he took his order.

No matter how she tried, Irmina was unable keep her eyes off Ancel. He was a man now, not the boy she remembered. Taller, his back straighter, shoulders broader, and the dark hair she loved so much well-oiled and tied with a leather cord, he was a picture of perfection. His eyes were a deeper emerald than before, similar to Ryne’s, but darker. They were also harder. The contempt and anger written on his face amplified when their gazes met.

“What’s she doing here?” Ancel said, voice deeper and more grating than she recalled. “She ran off to become an Ashishin. Shouldn’t she be across the Vallum somewhere or at the Iluminus? No one needs or wants her here.”

She stiffened her shoulders against the pain of his words and took a seat next to Galiana. Kachien worked her way to Ancel’s side of the table, even the simple act of walking somehow reeking of seduction, and sat next to him, her face expressionless.

“She is here because we do need her. You need her,” Galiana said.

Irmina frowned at the statement but said nothing.

“I don’t need her. I have all I need at my side.”

The words made Irmina flinch as if struck by an open palm.

"No, boy," Galiana began.

"I'm no longer a boy."

"Really?" Galiana smirked. "I cannot tell. Only a silly boy would refuse help in times as dire as these. Unless, of course, your mother is no longer a concern."

Ancel's glare would have split rocks. "I want no help from her."

"Control." Ryne's voice was a low rumble of thunder. "Seek it. And show proper respect to the Shin."

"But-"

"No buts. Master yourself."

Ancel inhaled, slow and deep. "She left us. She left me." He paused. "At a time when I could have used her help. Now she's back, as an Ashishin no less, and I'm supposed to say nothing?"

"I know I hurt you, Anc, but-"

"Don't call me that."

"Fine. I had my reasons. There were things I had to do."

"Yes, I know." Ancel's voice took on a sharp edge. "'Life and love are brutal teachers. Learn, adjust, and survive. Or die. Those are your choices. I choose life.' Remember those words? I do."

"I–I." She hung her head. "If I could change things I would, but I can't. I'm a stronger woman for the choices I've made. Hate me or love me."

Ancel locked gazes with her. "I hate you."

A throbbing pain seared her chest. Why was she feeling like this? She thought she'd overcome these emotions. Finding out his parents might not be the evil people she believed only made things worse. She'd given up a big part of her life only to lose one of the things that really mattered to her. She took a deep breath. "If that's how you feel." She turned to Galiana. "Well, what is it you wanted to discuss."

"This first," Galiana indicated her and Ancel, "but I see this is something you must sort out between yourselves. For now, set it aside. You have been hiding things from me, Ancel. What did Charra do out there? What is he?"

"I can't say."

"Cannot or will not?"

"I'm not allowed." Ancel set his jaw stubbornly.

Even after all these years, Irmina recognized that expression.

Galiana tapped her lips for a moment as she studied him. "Very well. Shin Irmina, tell us what happened in Ostania, how you come to know Ryne and Kachien."

After another glance at Ancel, Irmina told her story beginning with her mission to find Ryne, to Kahkon's taking, to discovering Kachien near the bodies of murdered strangers around Carnas. She

continued, reliving the battle at Castere, but making sure to omit Bertram's revelation of Ryne's true identity. When she finished, Ryne told his part, repeating much of the same with the inclusion of Kachien near the Wraithwoods. All gazes settled on Kachien.

"High Shin Jerem sent me to Carnas to protect Kahkon and to watch Ryne," Kachien said, voice emotionless. "I did kill the men they found. They were all Amuni's Children. When their army massacred everyone in Carnas and fed them to the shade, my own people were among them. I knew then my home was no more. I reported my failure to Jerem. He gave me a choice; help keep Ancel safe or take my own life."

"High Shin Jerem again," Irmina said. "I'm growing tired of him moving us like players on a senjin field."

"Jerem does as he needs, but there is something else bothering me." Galiana turned her gaze on Ryne. "Why would you need protection? Why couldn't you have stopped all this from the start?"

"There are limits to even my power. Besides, Mayor Bertram was another such as myself, under someone else's influence. Whose? I don't know."

Galiana's brow puckered for a moment before she spoke. "Another thing, Irmina, you mentioned the dead men were all near kinai patches. Ryne said the Wraithwoods with the villagers were not far from a kinai orchard. Jerem told us something similar was discovered by you on this side of the Vallum."

"Yes?" Irmina furrowed her brow, uncertain where Galiana was going.

Galiana turned to Ancel. "Remember that glen of yours and Mirza's?"

The mention of the glen brought back fond memories of time well spent in Ancel's arms. The effort not to look in his face proved harder than she could manage.

"Yes," Ancel avoided her eyes. "Wait … you don't think."

"It could be used for Wraithwoods?" Galiana nodded. "Would we even know who has gone missing with all the shadeling attacks? We still have not visited each outlying farm or small village raided since. It is time we did."

"No one has been there since my father?"

"Yes, the Seifer and Nema patrols, but from what Irmina says, I would like us to send some of our own now."

"When?" Ancel's face lit up at the prospect of hunting the shade.

Why would he seem so enthusiastic? She still had nightmares about the creatures.

"You will not be coming with us," Galiana said. "I need you safe, especially with him here now." Her gaze drifted to Ryne.

“I agree.” Ryne nodded. “There’s no reason for you to take a risk. In time, with more training, yes. Now? No.”

“A sensible teacher.” Galiana smiled. “The type I like and you need.”

Rolt brought dishes laden with food to the table.

“Well, I would not want to impose on you two any further.” Galiana stood. “Irmina, I need to speak with you.”

Reluctantly, Irmina pushed up from her chair. This time she didn’t need to try to catch Ancel’s attention. He was staring at her. His eyes were chips of ice.

Chapter 16

Long after Shin Galiana left with Irmina and Kachien, Ancel sat picking at his food, chewing on a thin slice of deer without tasting it. He reached a hand up to the pocket where he once kept Irmina's letter before he stopped himself. It was no longer there. He'd destroyed it the night he met Kachien.

With a heavy sigh, he pushed his plate away. Almost two years had gone since she abandoned him. Now she reappeared as if nothing happened. It didn't help that she was more beautiful than his savored memories. When Irmina left, she was a tad softer, but that had changed. The unmistakable mark of muscles honed from years training marked her now, and apparently not in her features alone. Her jaw line and chin stopped a hair shy of masculinity, but somehow, that tough exterior warmed his loins. So did her confident air and haughtiness. Maybe the attraction was a product of the rigors he experienced since this entire ordeal began. At least he hoped so. Yet, he knew it was more than that. He'd watched her move, taking in her sublime mixture of grace and strength, that when combined with her curves, he found intoxicating. To him, she was trouble personified.

He thought he'd gotten over her, but seeing her again brought forth emotions he'd buried. Unwanted feelings. The worst of them left him aware of a love he loathed yet was unable to cast aside.

His relationship with Kachien complicated matters even further. Her job as an assassin and the power she used, which at one time induced fear, no longer bothered him since he gained his Etchings. And she stopped working as a courtesan ever since she rescued him. The hint of a smile tugged at his lips. *Mirza would have said whore.* He wondered what his friend would think of Irmina's return. Probably nothing good.

Well, he didn't care. She was the past, dead to him like the meat on his plate. The longing to rush into her arms and hug her had almost overwhelmed him until he remembered her letter. *Two years. Two years with no word from you.* He grimaced. *May Amuni damn you to Hydae.*

Frozen fingers crept down his spine. He shook the feeling off, picked up his wine cup, and emptied the contents. Maybe he should drown his thoughts about the woman. Or call on Kachien. The time spent with her often brightened his temperament on days when his mother's plight preoccupied his mind. Would it be the same with Irmina here? He couldn't say one way or another.

"You're troubled," Ryne said across from him, his voice muffled. The man was sopping up sauce from his third plate with a thick piece

of bread.

"A little."

Ryne grunted. "More than a little. I can feel you, remember?"

Ancel let out a breath. He'd forgotten about the link. Over the past few months he taught himself how to push the connection to the back of his mind. He'd done the same for the links in the pendant and the sword. When deep in thought, he hardly noticed any of them. Ryne's words made him aware of the ball inside himself.

"How can you tell what I feel?" Ancel strained his mind toward the lump trying to sense Ryne's emotions.

"Eventually, you'll recognize them as you would your own. The more time we spend close to each other, the stronger they will be come. Of course, you can always talk to me." Ryne gave him a lopsided grin, and then stuffed the bread into his mouth.

"I'm talking to you now," Ancel said.

Ryne stopped chewing to swallow. "There's talking. And then there's *talking*." For the second sentence, his mouth never moved.

Ancel gasped. Ryne's words had come from inside his head. "H-How-"

"Picture what you feel of me in your mind. Reach for our connection as you would the Eye. Sink yourself into it and project your speech to me."

Ancel attempted to reach out and touch the lump. After a few tries, he managed to caress it with his mind. He pretended the link was simply a part of his body then tried to make it a part of his thoughts. Nothing happened.

"Keep trying," Ryne said, "You've mastered entering the Eye so this will come easier."

Ancel scrunched up his face.

"Don't force it. Adapt it to what you sense, to what your mind tells you is available. Make it an extension of your will."

Inhaling deeply, Ancel made several more attempts, but to no avail.

"Your mind is clouded now by your thoughts of Irmina. Once you push that distraction behind you, you'll be able to properly link with me."

"She's even getting in the way of my training," Ancel growled under his breath. "What do you suggest I do?"

"Confront the issue. Go to her. From there the rest is up to you."

"I told her I hated her. What if she doesn't want to see me?"

Ryne shrugged. "She won't turn you away. It's in her eyes. She loves you."

Ancel almost choked. "All I saw was hurt and loathing."

"You weren't looking closely enough."

“I was.”

“Were you?”

Ancel frowned, and then narrowed his eyes. “You mean … the auras?”

Ryne nodded. “The strongest emotions are the easiest to see. That’s how I knew you were going to strike the Knight Captain. You have this anger seething below the surface. The essences can use that against you, coaxing you to take their power. Become your hate’s greatest foe, and not only will you be happier, but your control will be much easier. A darkness resides in you, Ancel. Whatever the reason for it, you must overcome its pull.”

The night of his mother’s taking rushed into Ancel’s mind. The voices spoke to him that night, giving him the power he needed to use the *divya* his parents had hidden away at the winery. Through the artifact, he connected to the temples throughout Denestia and tapped into the Mater housed in each. Exactly how the elements came to be built within them, he wasn’t sure, but he’d been able to draw upon them nonetheless. He unwittingly summoned the netherling with that power.

Plates of its black armor honed to a fine edge, the gigantic beast stepped through the portal. Tentacles split into four along the ribs, shortening and solidifying into arms with skin so shiny it glowed. Claws tipped each four-digit hand. Slits opened where a head should be to reveal eight milky-white eyes. The face formed, jaw stretching into a fanged eel-like countenance. A horn stood out on the forehead, and two others stretched back where there should have been ears. Wriggling worms-like beings swarmed around the creature, floating in the air, each about five feet long, their facial features matching their giant counterpart.

“Ancel. Ancel. Stop. Release your Matersense now.”

Ryne’s frantic voice and a hand shaking his shoulder broke Ancel from his daydream. He shook his head, trying to focus. Finally, Ryne’s massive form appeared, hovering over him.

“What happened?” Ryne asked. “One moment you were fine, and the next you opened your Matersense and began drawing on the essences. You held more power than you can control. More power than you have naturally.”

“My, my mother,” Ancel said, his head throbbing. One hand squeezed tight around his mother’s pendant. “Sometimes I get these dreams of her. More like memories of what happened that night but as if it’s happening right now. I repeat what I did then, drawing on the power of a *divya* they kept in our home. Through it I–I connected to the temples and drew on the Mater they stored.”

Ryne leaned forward, eyes gleaming. “An amplified link and

Forge. One of the reasons I first came to the Setian. They used Forgings well beyond their means." He appeared lost in thought, frowning as if he strained for something. "Hmmm," he continued absently. He scratched at his long hair. On the back of his hand, a creature with features like one of the great mountain cats stood out. "To make such a link, there needs to be a catalyst." Eyes shifting from side, he sat staring into the distance.

"A catalyst?"

"Yes," Ryne said. "To create an amplified link or Forge, something must connect the Matii, the *divya,* the essences, and the resources used. Usually the catalyst is made from natural sources as they work the best. For example, to create a large enough Forging to alter the weather, the Matii would need to reach through each other, a *divya,* the Flows, and an extraordinary pool of water or heat depending on what change they wished to accomplish. In this case, the water or heat would be the catalyst. I never discovered what the Setian used when I was among them."

Ancel frowned. *If you were in Seti at some point, how did my father not recognize you?* Since the revelation that his father was one of Seti's most brilliant Knight Commanders from before the Shadowbearer War, they often engaged in conversations about those times. His father taught him as much concerning military strategy as he knew, often quoting Henden's *Disciplines of Soldiering.* Stefan would talk about all they'd lost and the times and peoples he remembered before the majority of the Setian perished in the Tribunal's final assault against Nerian. Not once had he ever mentioned a giant warrior with tattoos covering his body.

Memories of his father's stories made him consider Stefan's age again. *Several centuries at the very least.* He remembered something else. "The kinai."

"What?'

"That's the catalyst," Ancel said. "Galiana told me. The kinai. They used the juices and wines my father was famous for along with my mother's Gift to extend their lives, Forged through the *divya* at the winery."

"What time of day did they pick the kinai?"

"Either at dawn or dusk."

"The Spellforge Hour."

Ancel frowned. He'd never considered it before, but now it made sense. The Spellforge Hour was the time the essences were at their strongest. No wonder the kinai juice was more portent.

"Can you take me to this *divya*?"

Excited by the prospect, Ancel answered quickly. "Yes. It's about half a day's ride by horse."

“I’m a little … large for a horse,’ Ryne admitted.

“Well, the dartans are in hibernation so we can’t get there any faster unless you ask Shin Galiana to Materialize us. And I doubt she’ll do that, not after ordering the Matii to rely on less powerful Forges. She fears Pathfinders will come here.”

“An honest assumption,” Ryne said. “Although sooner would be better, there’s some training you need before we go.”

A bit disappointed, Ancel asked, “When then?”

“A few weeks. Gives me time to get some much needed rest, and you, your training.”

“Which reminds me,” Ancel calculated Ryne’s massive body where he sat cross-legged on the wooden floor, “where are you going to sleep? I doubt any inn has a bed big enough for you.”

“Stables are fine.”

“Master Javed’s,” Ancel volunteered. “He has space to spare, and he also keeps most of the dartans. You should be able to find a decently warm spot next to one of them.”

“Sounds as good a place as any.” Ryne scratched at his unkempt beard, hanging almost to his chest. “Hopefully I can borrow a butcher knife from him and kill this thing.”

Ancel chuckled. “I’ve grown quite fond of mine, but I understand how you feel.”

Ryne’s face grew serious. “So tell me, when did a netherling attach itself to you?”

Ancel eyed Ryne. “Charra? How did you know? His aura?”

“No,” Ryne said, “his lack of an aura.”

“So anything without an aura is a netherling?”

“No, not necessarily, but no aura often signifies a creature not of this world. I had a friend who …” A pained expression crossed Ryne’s face for the briefest of moments. “That’s a story for another time. Let’s just say over the past few months I’ve come to the conclusion missing auras or ones that appear perfect mean something isn’t right. Nothing is perfect. In those cases, it’s best to be careful. With Charra, I guessed his origin.”

“But how did you know he belonged to me? He defended Kachien.”

Ryne climbed to his feet but remained in a stooping position, his head a foot shy of touching the ceiling. “Charra told me. Come. Take me to these stables of yours.”

Chapter 17

Despite the room's warmth, Shin Galiana huddled inside her cloak. The hearth crackled at her back, the scent of the wood used within it almost making her relax. Lamplight brightened the meeting hall's interior. The remaining members of the Eldanhill Council sat at their seats around the oak table. After the Sendethi attack and the subsequent shadeling encounters, they were down to ten instead of thirty. The number included the four who she'd sent with the other townsfolk to Torandil. The time to act was drawing closer than any of them suspected.

Irmina sat in the chair next to her. She wondered if the woman had accepted all she told her concerning the Dorns. It appeared so for the most part, but whenever Irmina glanced in Stefan's direction tiny creases formed at the corner of her eyes. To what extent she would take her animosity, Galiana wasn't certain.

The situation with Ancel served to make things worse. She'd hoped the boy had grown past his anger and had at least a little love for Irmina. His open dislike didn't go over well. Irmina had returned as an Ashishin and an assassin, but her love for Ancel was still evident. The pain in her face when he said he hated her had almost been too much for Galiana to watch in silence. How his loathing would affect Irmina's actions remained to be seen.

With some luck, Ryne could continue to keep him in check. The Eztezian himself presented his own set of problems. What she saw from Irmina toward him amounted to nothing less than hate. The kind of hate that drove people to kill. But that didn't make sense unless there was something they were both hiding. Which brought her to her other concerns about the man. Who or what could have such power to control an Eztezian? The only answers were the gods themselves or a netherling. She quickly ruled out the deities. As much as she believed in them, she had yet to see proof that they could touch the world. A netherling, on the other hand … Lips pursed, she listened to the council discussing their options.

"I don't see the point in waiting any longer," Edwin Valdeen said.

Galiana's expression soured simply from his voice, much less from looking at the beady-eyed man, his head so well-oiled it shone. Thank the gods Stefan had relieved him of his duties as Headspeaker. He should count his blessing he hadn't lost his head when Stefan found how close to death Ancel, Mirza, and Danvir had come. Only Edwin's past service to the council and the Setian as a whole had saved him.

"Yes, yes, we know." Guthrie Bemelle pushed back his chair a bit to make room for his belly. "Your daughter is safe in Torandil so we

should abandon everyone as you did the boys."

"That was a mistake," Edwin protested. "And last I checked your son is in Torandil also."

"A mistake we should have fixed," Devan Faber said, voice even. "With your head on a pike."

"I'm so tired of this. How many times must I say I'm sorry about your sons? You want my head so bad, take it then!"

"With pleasure." Devan reached for his sword.

Stefan's hand slapped against the tabletop. "Stop it." His voice cracked with a force to match the blow. "We voted and that's final. You two need to get over it. If I can, so can you."

"We're not you though, Stefan." Devan's eyes flashed with anger. "I'll never forgive him for almost making me lose my boy."

"I doubt any of us will, but we all make mistakes." Stefan's hands spread on the table. "I've made my share and cost many their lives-"

"Come on," Guthrie shook his head, "you can't compare what you did leading men into battle to what he's done."

"Soldiers or common folk; life is still life. Our boys are alive, Dev, Guth. Let their survival mean something. We have enough issues without fighting amongst ourselves."

The two grumbled their protests but nodded.

"Good." Stefan sighed. "Now, Javed, were you able to muster enough mounts from the outlying villages and farms?"

Thin lips moving as he silently counted, marking off numbers by touching each finger with his thumb, Javed's features wrinkled even more than usual. One milky eye narrowed. The man smelled like his stables. "Not quite. Too many old folk stayed back. We could manage if the weather was warmer and the dartans were out of hibernation."

"If wishes had wings," Stefan said. "Galiana, any progress convincing more folk to go to Torandil or at least head across to the Red Ridge and trek down to one of other towns?"

"Not much. Ever since the shadeling raids ceased, they began to feel safe again."

"Even with the reports of increased wolf and mountain cat attacks?" Stefan raised a questioning brow.

Galiana nodded. "They brought those up as a reason they needed to stay and protect their property. When the Dagodin show up, they ask to be left alone. Some say they were born here and they will die here before giving up their land."

Stefan sighed. "People tend to be the same no matter where they're from … willing to die for what they believe is theirs. We mustn't give up though."

"So you intend to hold on here until spring?" Edwin asked.

"If we need to."

Edwin scowled. “But what if … no, not what if … the Tribunal is sure to retaliate as they did in Randane. Look at us, we’ve donned Setian colors. The Quaking Forest and Dosteri flags fly here instead of the Tribunal’s Lightstorm. They’re going to come for us. And if not them, one of the other Granadian kingdoms for sure.”

“Not to mention the shadelings,” said Rohan Lankon, hair whiter than wispy clouds. “Anyone who thinks they’re all gone is a fool. There were simply too many. One thing the Shadowbearer War and the War of Remnants taught us is that they’re here, somewhere.”

“I agree with him,” Devan said. “I wouldn’t want to expose our people to any more harm than necessary.” His lips curled as he glanced in Edwin’s direction. “No matter what anyone else says.”

Galiana gave a slight dip of her head in Irmina’s direction.

Irmina stood. The other council members made to stand also.

“Stay seated, please,” Irmina said.

They did as she asked, but not without nervous glances. Eldanhill had more than their fair share of men and women who’d gone off to become Ashishin, but not under the present circumstances with them rebelling against the Tribunal. They’d all appeared elated at Irmina’s return until Galiana mentioned her title.

“Back at the Whitewater Inn, many of you were worried about the Tribunal’s response to what you’ve done here,” Irmina said. “I don’t know their exact plans. Will they act? There’s no doubt about that. Before I left, they were massing supplies and soldiers. Whether they were meant for here, Sendeth, Barson or Ostania, I can’t say.”

“Why would they bother with Ostania now?” Devan asked.

“Not all the shadelings have been culled. Also, a portion of Amuni’s Children are laying siege to a few towns. There’s also the matter of them losing their toehold in Astoca.”

“From the reports I received, the Ostanian kingdoms can now take care of their own,” Stefan said.

“The Tribunal still has other desires besides simply helping to clean up the aftermath of the shade’s invasion.” Irmina’s voice was cool, but her jaw worked.

A knowing smile graced Stefan’s lips. “Ah, an excuse for them to get one kingdom or another in their debt.”

“Meanwhile, we’re suffering here,” Edwin said.

“Yes, but it’s not like they aren’t dealing with their enemies here also,” Guthrie chimed in. “The Sendethi losses show as much.”

“Although I would hate to go against your decision as commander, Stefan,” Irmina said. The room quieted. “I think it’s in your best interest to leave for Torandil as soon as possible.”

“Duly noted,” Stefan replied. “But I abandoned my people once. I won’t leave a single one behind this time.”

Irmina inclined her head. “Very well. There’s also another reason the Tribunal is gathering their armies.”

This part worried Galiana. She wasn’t sure how Stefan would take it. *Would he be willing to leave immediately?* She hoped he would, but suggesting as much may push him in the other direction. For years, he wanted them to prepare for this day by funneling their people back into Ostania. And for years, she refused, stating that the Tribunal suspected. Advising him to leave some behind now wouldn’t go over well, at least not from her.

“As you know by now,” Irmina said, “I met Ryne Waldron before. In Ostania. Together we encountered other Setian.”

Galiana took in the council member’s reactions. Except for Stefan, they all appeared surprised.

“As I thought.” Irmina was staring at Stefan. “You know.”

“Yes.”

Intrigued, Galiana did her best not to sit up. She had to appear to know everything. All eyes shifted to Stefan now.

“Not every Dagodin or Ashishin from the Mysteras who were stationed in Ostania have died or remained with the Tribunal’s legions.” Stefan met each gaze. “I had someone close to me before the Shadowbearer War take in those I trusted. He’s held a foothold in our lands in preparation for the days to come. They’ve been between this side of the Vallum and Seti ever since.” He regarded Irmina with a raised brow. “How did you guess?”

“Daggerpaws,” Irmina said. “You often advised us to get more of them, but they proved too dangerous to keep around Eldanhill.”

Galiana frowned, remembering those past requests by Stefan. Charra came to mind once again. She would have to find a way to convince Ancel to reveal the beast’s secret. Right now, something else struck her. “The Siefer and Nema belonged to you all along. You taught them about daggerpaws. You used the animals to gain the clans’ trust.”

“Along with enough kinai to keep them warm through the long winters.” Stefan smiled.

“That’s why they never troubled you,” Guthrie added. “Why you would often visit the mountains …”

Stefan shrugged.

“What else have you been hiding?” Edwin wore his usual scowl.

Stefan’s eyes became steely pinpoints. “I’m surprised you’re questioning me considering I’ve never led us astray. Trust me; anything I hold from you is for your own good. Why did you mention the Setian?” Stefan asked in Irmina’s direction.

“When last did you hear from them?”

“A few weeks before the Sendethi siege.”

“Then, there’s something you don’t know that you should. They were struggling with attacks of their own,” Irmina said. “Shadeling attacks. Ryne fought the man responsible and failed to defeat him.” She grimaced. “They never had a chance to warn you of the Wraithwoods growing on this side of the Vallum. The Tribunal found out also. One of the places mentioned was here, in Eldanhill. I advise you to gather who you can and leave.”

The members burst out into panicked chatter.

Galiana couldn’t help her smile. *Smooth.* The way Irmina had drawn out everything wouldn’t point to them having planned the conversation. The rest was up to Stefan now. With this news, what choice was there but to call for an immediate exodus to Torandil?

“Your argument makes sense.” Stefan’s voice was calm, too much so. “However, I promised myself long ago I’d never leave my people in the hands of the shade again. I won’t break my vow now.”

Despite her hopes, Galiana suspected Stefan might still react this way. She resigned herself to their second option, one she wished to avoid despite the threat Jillian said might lurk within the forest. “There is only one way to know whoever stays might be safe. We must scour the Greenleaf, starting at Ancel’s glen.”

“Makes sense,” Stefan said. “I have someone in mind to lead a cohort. Give me a couple weeks to make the necessary arrangements.”

Galiana stood. “Good. Now, if you all will excuse me, I have other business to attend to at the Mystera.” There had to be a book within the libraries with information on Ryne.

Chapter 18

Weeks later, after a particularly grueling day spent training with Ryne, Ancel relaxed at a table in the Whitewater Inn's common room. Or at least he attempted to. Clean-shaven, wearing a dark gray coat, he nursed a drink. Since Irmina's appearance, the only times he managed to shake her from his thoughts were when he practiced. He delved into his sword work daily, often from dawn until late evening. When it wasn't the sword, then he read up on Ostania's history, or memorized more from *the Disciplines*. Ryne still hadn't allowed him to do any Forging beyond touching his Matersense, identifying each essence around him, and discerning ways in which they interacted with his Etchings. Whenever he asked to do more, Ryne told him that he wanted to ensure his connection to Mater became as smooth as the natural flow of his sword Stances.

Accompanied by Mirza, he made this trip to the inn nightly, often bringing Kachien with him, while Charra either waited outside or found some sport in the Greenleaf. Tonight, Kachien was on the small stage singing an Ostanian song while a musician strummed a takuatin, his fingers gliding across the instrument's thirty-two strings in an upbeat rhythm. Locals crowded the tables, along with merchants, refugees, as well as a few students in uniform. Spilled beer, wine, food, and sweaty human bodies made for a mesh of odors that some may have found upsetting. For him, it added some sense of normalcy, as did the raucous laughter and chatter within the room. They were a welcome respite to the atmosphere of worry and uncertainty of late.

Although Irmina lived at the inn, it happened to be the one place where he didn't run into her. When he stayed home, sometimes she'd show up with Galiana to have a meeting with his father. If he trained later than usual at the Mystera, eventually she would come watch him as she often did in the days before she abandoned him. After trying different ways, he discovered the best method to avoid her was to venture to the inn.

Except for tonight. For whatever reason, she chose this night to sit at a table in a secluded area, having a meal. What grated at him was that she acted as if he didn't exist, not once glancing in his direction. Almost every patron who entered the serving hall acknowledged her with a bow. Out of respect, he'd been forced to do the same. Her presence made him want to get drunk.

"She's here on purpose," he grumbled. "Trying to get under my skin."

"I'd say she's doing quite the job of it too." Mirza smiled, his sharp blue shirt and matching jacket enough to put a noble to shame.

He downed his drink.

Ancel glared at his friend. “Why’d she have to eat here anyway?”

“Um, she lives here?”

“You know what I mean.”

“To get under your skin?” Mirza shrugged, his eyes now twinkling with mirth.

Ancel growled under his breath.

“You know, for a man who claimed he’s over her, and for one who has that,” Mirza nodded toward Kachien on the stage, “you do seem a bit … bothered. If I were you’ I’d go over and say hello.”

“This coming from my best friend who pushed me toward forgetting about the woman.” Ancel shook his head.

“You remember when I made fun of you about not being able to bed an Ashishin that day we went to the glen?”

Ancel frowned for a moment before nodding.

“Well, you could prove me wrong.”

“Do you think …?” Ancel’s voice trailed off as he took in Mirza’s smug expression.

“And there it is.” Mirza’s teeth showed in a wide grin. “I knew it. Especially after you shaved. For all your supposed anger and annoyance, you *do* want her back.”

Ancel opened his mouth to deny the accusation, but words failed him.

“Exactly.” Clasping his hands behind his head, Mirza leaned back in his chair.

Although his skin crawled to admit it, he knew Mirza words rang with truth. His friend had a knack for that. The more he saw Irmina, the more he thought of her, the more he wondered what things could have been like between them, or if there could still be a relationship despite their differences. How else to explain why he’d shaved? Her leaving still stung, and her return had opened old wounds, but to be honest, he felt better knowing she was in Eldanhill.

When he searched his feelings, the knowledge that he got to see her face, her dark hair, and those golden-brown eyes of hers made him want to smile. Unbeknownst to anyone, he found time at night to watch her head to the inn from one of her many meetings. Sometimes, he stayed outside peering up at the windows until she put out the lamps and went to bed. Of late, dreams of her were a welcome change to the nightmares about his mother and the black-armored man.

He glanced toward her table again, hoping to catch her eye, and frowned. Mouth open, a slice of bread held at chin level, Irmina was staring in the direction of the stage. At that moment, Ancel noticed the music’s change to a slower pace, bubbling like a spring formed from newly thawed ice. He followed Irmina’s gaze.

Kachien was swaying like a drunkard, her voice growing softer until it faded into nothingness.

No, Ancel thought as he realized what she was doing. *Please, no.*

But not only didn't she stop, her movements increased into a full-fledged Temtesa.

As the patrons noticed, conversations dwindled. The room fell into silence broken only by the takuatin's notes, and the flutter of Kachien's trousers and shirt with each twirl, stretch of her leg, and flick of her honey-colored hair. Her hips snapped back and forth, and despite her trousers, they radiated seduction. As she always did when she danced the Temtesa, she had eyes only for him. His face grew heated. Riveted where he sat, he drank in every movement.

And then a strange phenomenon occurred. On stage, Kachien blurred and became Irmina as she used to dance for him in the same fashion. Those times flashed through his head, bringing on a longing he hadn't experienced in almost two years. He shut his eyes in an attempt to drive away the images. The music picked up in speed, and with it so did the swirl of those old images. Faster and faster they came. He and Irmina together as they once were.

He barely heard the whoops and applause from the crowd or noticed when the music ended. Staggering to his feet, he fled.

Chapter 19

H*ow dare that woman.* Irmina stalked from the Whitewater Inn. Even to her, Kachien's Temtesa had been intoxicating. She had no doubt the woman did the dance on purpose. A stab to remind her of the love she and Ancel once shared, and what Kachien now appeared to own. *How could she be so vindictive? What made her think I cared anyway?* Irmina quivered, not solely with anger at what Kachien had done, but also because she knew she did care.

She had no other explanation for disguising herself to watch Ancel spar with Ryne on a daily basis. To say he had filled out well would have been an understatement. There was no doubt he maintained a rigorous exercise regimen comparable to the Raijin considering the broadness of his back, his muscled arms, and his chest. She felt her face flush simply by thinking about his body. And the way he moved! It was like watching a mountain lion stalk its prey before striking in a flurry. At times he attacked with such speed she wondered how Ryne managed to dodge every strike, but then, she'd seen Ryne fight also. She still recalled his sessions with Sakari that led her to believe either of them could best a Weaponmaster. Ancel was almost on par.

Irmina strode down the Eldan Road, trying to shake the thoughts from her mind. Occasionally, she reached for where the tiny knot of her strange link to Ancel should have been. Whatever had happened inside, it had disappeared, cut off after it briefly flared. Trying to ignore what it could mean, she let the town occupy her attention.

Despite the torches and lamps, much remained familiar, but the differences stood out. Bigger homes sprouted up in many places. The cobblestoned streets were more crowded than she remembered them being at night with more wagons, drays, and carts trundling along. Even the noises were different. Eldanhill used to be a quieter place with the murmur of people interspersed by the smithies or the stone masons as its heartbeat. Behind it all, if one listened just right, the whir from the windmills and the rush of the Kelvore River was its lifeblood. Somewhere deep in the background would be the Whitewater Falls' distant roar. Now, the incessant clang of metal on steel or rock played a song of war.

The familiar roads still existed. Thank the gods for that. Tezian Lane, Damal Way, Henden Lane, Amelie's Avenue, Thanairen Square. How many realized the significance of those names? The last one made her remember Ryne's identities. Ryne Thanairen Waldron. Nerian the Shadowbearer. How none recognized the man was beyond her, but as she promised Jerem, she would keep his secret. For Ancel's

sake.

An ache pricked at her chest as she recalled the anguish on Ancel's face when he left the inn. Why was she concerned for him anyway? He made his feelings for her quite plain. The nerve of him to sleep with some other woman in her absence. How dare he? No. She was being ridiculous. *You didn't really expect him not to move on did you? Not after the letter.* Gritting her teeth at the conflicting emotions, she kept on walking.

As if her thoughts concerning him weren't difficult enough, she still needed to decide on how to proceed with the Exalted's orders. Try as she might, she failed to muster a single reason to take Ancel's life other than their command. Did Galiana tell her the truth or only tried to manipulate her into thinking differently about the council and the Dorns? Which brought her to another question: what were the chances that the tomes in the Iluminus' Lower Library were false? Misinformation planted to stir opinions in the Tribunal's favor. The idea wasn't beyond the realm of possibility; the Tribunal employed similar tactics with the Devout. Their jobs to preach the advantages of Streamean worship, the Tribunal's virtues, and the swaying of histories and opinions among the masses worked well for centuries. Tell the right people a certain thing and eventually the word spreads. Guide what you want known carefully, and a lie becomes a fact.

What details did she really know beyond any doubt concerning her parent's death? She never saw the bodies for herself. She'd been away, visiting Jillian when it all happened. All she had were her parents' research papers into how the council maintained their longevity and their suspicions concerning the Tribunal. There were the confessions of the men who carried out the act, but then what did that really mean? Could her parents have been what Tae and Galiana claimed? Servants to the shade? The mere thought curdled her insides.

She longed to put down the weight of her doubts, but the hatred she harbored toward the council and the Dorns kept her warm many a night. A part of her wanted to believe they were good people. The seeds Galiana had planted gave her a slight hope, but somehow she feared clinging to its precipitous edge.

Jaw clenching, she barely acknowledged the passersby and their nervous glances, as they hurried from her path, heads bobbing when they muttered her title. Thoughts and choices crowding her, she failed to notice that she'd walked a circle until she found herself back at the inn's entrance. When she reached the door, she stopped.

A huge, gray-white form lay between the inn and the adjoining building, torchlight playing off its fur. Charra raised his head, tongue lolling, his gaze following her as she entered the establishment. Her heart began to thump with the possibility that Ancel was inside.

Anxious to meet him, she hurried through the foyer. Heart fluttering, a smile touched her lips. Maybe he'd come around after all. Her anger that he slept with Kachien mattered little. She wanted him to know she cared. No. Downplaying what she felt would not do. *I love him*. There, she'd admitted it. Warmth crept through her with the thought.

Inside the inn, the usual lamps lit the greeting room and the hall beyond, their reddish hue an inviting allure. Her feet feathered the polished floors as she strived not to run like some foolish schoolgirl. When she reached the dining hall, she searched among the patrons. Rolt and the serving girl, Callie, made as if to come to her, but she shook her head. Ancel wasn't at any of the tables. Crestfallen, she left the room and trudged upstairs.

Lost in thought and the sinking feeling in her chest, she pushed open her room door. She'd had high hopes. A sigh escaped her lips.

"Bellflowers were always your fragrance of choice like my mother."

She jumped at the sound of Ancel's voice. Slowly, she turned, telling herself not to show her excitement. If her heart beat any harder, she swore he'd be able to hear it.

He sat on the chair next to the bed, oiled hair a shiny black tinged by the red lamplight. Face clean-shaven, his jaw line appeared much sharper than she recalled, but she loved the profile no less. His eyes were shining emerald pinpoints.

"I never stopped wearing your favorite perfume," she finally managed. "Even if it meant me going to find the flowers myself, I did so every day."

"I kept your letter with me for a year," Ancel said.

Her heart stilled.

"I read it every day." His voice became hoarse. "I kissed your red lip prints any time I opened it. Several times a day." He touched the left side of his chest. "I kept it here, in whatever coat I wore, always close to my heart." His eyes shone with wetness now.

"Oh, Anc, I'm so sorry," she whispered.

He didn't say not to use the nickname. Her heart leapt.

"Every day I prayed you would come back to me, but you never did." He stood.

Feet leaden and rooted to the rug and floor beneath, she stuttered, "I–I thought about returning. I wanted to, so many times, but I–I couldn't."

"You mean, you wouldn't."

She squeezed her eyes tight against the tears trickling down her face. "Because of what I found out then, my heart wouldn't let me. If I had returned, I would've tried to kill your parents, destroy the

council."

Ancel's eyes shot open. "Why?"

She told him, recounting when she first discovered her ability to tame animals, then being sent off to the Iluminus. Once there, she'd hear the whispers among the Ashishin concerning her family. A look of puzzlement stole across Ancel' face.

"You can speak to animals? You mean like Charra?"

"No, I tried with him once, but he rejected my control."

"Control," he repeated, brow puckering even harder. "You can control them also?"

"Well, yes and no. It's more like suggestions. As if I'm their leader and they follow where I say."

Expression thoughtful, he grunted.

She continued with her story, telling him how she discovered the records of the part the council and his parents played before the Shadowbearer War. How Ancel's father had begun the culling by slaying one of her ancestors, Garrick Nagel. She laid out the Dorns' orders for her parents' execution so many centuries later. Then she relayed Galiana's version of the events. When she finished she realized she now sat in a chair not far from him, wringing her hands, tears streaming down her face.

Ancel strode across the rugs until he loomed over her. Reaching down, he took her hand. She didn't resist. When their fingers met, a tingling sensation swept through her. His hands were rough, calluses dotting his palms. With their fingers entwined, he pulled her gently to her feet. When he hugged her, she lost all sense of being. She floated in some nameless void where only pleasure existed.

"You're right. I wouldn't have believed you. All this happened for a reason." His voice was a tender buzz against her ear. "But I don't believe what you read in the Iluminus. My father had his reasons. I trust him."

His heart thumped in tune with hers. Irmina buried her face in his neck, inhaling deeply. The scent of whatever he used to shave was strong and pleasant.

"I gave up everything after you left," Ancel whispered. "I no longer trained or studied in earnest. Those dreams I had of Jenoah and the Mater coursing through the cities haunted me from time to time, even in my waking hours, and often at the Mystera. In order to forget you, I turned to bedding any woman I could."

Irmina stiffened at his confession. "So does that explain Kachien?" She cleared her throat.

"In ways, yes, and no." Ancel sighed.

Her heart faltered.

"I care for her. She helped me forget you, despite what she is. I

needed someone to listen to me, someone to talk to, someone who could relate to my pain … she was there. She also saved my life."

"Looking a bit like me didn't hurt either," Irmina said, purely out of spite, almost wanting to bite the words back.

"That made it easier. I imagined she was you on many nights. At times, I still do, like when she danced the Temtesa."

Those words stung but set her spirits soaring. Now she understood why he'd left the way he did, the pain on his face. She leaned away from him looking deep into his eyes. "I'm here now."

He kissed her, and she grabbed hard to hope. Breathless, she still had her eyes closed when he eased her away. She opened her eyes.

"Dance for me, Mina."

All her doubts disappeared.

Chapter 20

Accompanied by Charra the next morning, Ancel made his way to Old Javed's stable a new man. The air was fresh and crisp, a testament to new beginnings. He smiled wider than he remembered doing in a long while as he thought about the night with Irmina. The lovemaking had been like old times but better. To Irmina's delight, he'd used every trick and position Kachien taught him. The thought of Kach brought him down a notch, but he shrugged it off. Eventually, he would explain it all to her. Of all people, she would understand.

Not many people graced the streets this early dawn. Sunlight set fire to the Kelvore's snowy peaks and lit the few wispy clouds scudding across the sky in flame-colored hues. More soldiers than usual were patrolling, but he wasn't overly concerned about their presence. With his current mood, the cold wind blowing didn't warrant drawing his cloak around him. The breeze swirled back and forth like lovers chasing each other. In Whitewater Falls, snow squalls often followed days like this.

At the stables, Ryne was practicing. The giant danced so quickly from Stance to Style Ancel found his movements difficult to track, although he did manage to pick out a few repetitions from the Forms and the Streams. With each change, Ryne's Etchings shifted.

Dressed as usual in his leathers, Ryne's face was now clean-shaven, his hair tied by a leather cord and only reaching his nape. A couple early risers stood close by, whispering amongst themselves as Ryne worked through a series of attacks, easing from top to middle to almost touching the ground before deftly stepping to one side and unleashing a strike that would behead a man with ease.

When he finished, Ryne faced Ancel and sheathed his greatsword in the scabbard angled crossways at his hip. No sweaty sheen marred his features. "Ready?"

"Yes." A slight tingle coursed through Ancel's body at the thought of their expedition. No one had gone out to the winery since his mother's taking.

One of Old Man Javed's stable boys arrived with a black-coated gelding. Ancel frowned at who followed on a chestnut mare. Behind the boy, Mirza rode in a full set of leather armor and furs to match Ancel's own, his bow slung across his back. In one hand, he carried an ebonsteel spear.

"What're you doing here?" Ancel asked.

"Going with you." Mirza shrugged. "You didn't think you'd make the trip up there alone did you?"

"I'm not alone." Ancel gestured to Ryne before tilting his head to

one side and frowning. “How did you know I was going to the winery anyway?”

“I didn’t, but I’m glad you told me. Such a good friend you are.”

Ancel groaned.

“It was obvious you were going somewhere though. Since *Shin* Irmina and this one arrived,” Mirza nodded to Ryne, “they’re all anyone’s been muttering about. I didn’t get a chance to talk to you yesterday after you ran off like a school girl,” Mirza grinned mischievously, “ but I returned in time to see Charra outside the Whitewater. Rolt told me you were upstairs speaking to Irmina. I take it the conversation went well and you had a lot to say. After all, you *talked* all night.”

Ancel couldn’t help but blush. “Let’s just say we made up.”

“Bet you did.” Mirza winked. “If you get any redder or grin any wider, you’ll split your cheeks.”

Ryne’s brief chuckle made them both glance to him. “I’m glad you’ve *spoken* to her.”

“Not you too.” Ancel rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know whether to be happy for you or sad,” Mirza said.

Ancel expected this but said nothing.

“I remember what you were like when she left is all I’m saying. If she leaves again, it’ll be worse. Plus, Kachien spent the night outside the inn, sitting with Charra.”

“She did?”

“Yes. I did.”

Ancel whirled around. Wrapped in the folds of her dark cloak, Kachien sat on the stable’s sloping roof below the eaves.

“I–I can explain, Kach,” Ancel began.

“Explain what? There is nothing to explain. I expected nothing less. I told you before … your ways here are strange to me. A long lost love’s return is something to rejoice. Many among the Alzari often take multiple lovers until they join someone as one. We were never joined.” Mirza coughed and she paused. “Not that I wanted such a thing. My life does not allow for it.”

“You have all the luck.” Mirza sucked his teeth. “In your place, one woman would’ve tried to gut me, but here you are getting permission to be with two.”

At a loss for words, Ancel simply stared at Kachien. She leaped down and asked one of Javed’s horse handlers to bring her a mount.

“It is my job, remember?” Kachien said at his narrow-eyed expression. “Too long now I have allowed you to go your own way. Your father has been unhappy since the woods.”

“Yes, he has,” Mirza agreed. “By the way, I forgot to mention, I had some men check out those wolves of yours. They’re running in

bigger packs, but not one of them are acting as smart as you said."

For the briefest of moments, he considered telling Kachien she couldn't accompany him. Until he remembered she did whatever she felt was right, which often meant ignoring what he wanted. "Fine," he said to her

She gave him a slight nod.

Ancel pondered Mirza's news, trying to see if it fit with what he'd suspected since Irmina told him of her ability. In ways, it did, but he could think of no one who would be able to control the animals. Still, he knew what he'd seen. Their reactions had been far from normal.

Ryne cleared his throat. "It's time for us to be gone."

"Your father doesn't know about this trip, does he?" Mirza asked.

"Of course not." Ancel took the mount from the stable boy and climbed into the saddle. "Why?"

"He left this morning, leading a full cohort of Dagodin and a few Ashishin into the Greenleaf. Word has it they're heading to our old glen. The scouts they sent out weeks ago finally returned. The news didn't seem to be good, but I wasn't allowed into the meeting."

"Galiana mentioned she wanted to do that," Ancel said. "They're making sure there aren't any shadelings infesting the glen."

Mirza grunted. "Could explain why the wolves are running in larger packs."

"All the more reason for you to wait for your father's return." Kachien climbed onto the back of a bay roan.

"I'm a grown man, Kach. We covered this before. Should I ask for my father to hold my hand when it's time to go to war too? I mean, you do realize that's what we've begun here? War."

Kachien dipped her head again. But here eyes told him she disagreed with his choice, but would be there regardless.

"Only one problem left," Mirza said.

"What's that?"

"Him." Mirza nodded to Ryne. "Not even one of the draught horses can carry your giant."

"Ryne," answered his mentor, "not him, not giant … Ryne. A mount is no issue. I'll run." In response to their openmouthed gapes, he smiled, "How do you think I got here once my dartan went into hibernation?"

Mirza glanced at Ancel. "He isn't serious is he?"

Ryne's expression was a blank mask.

"I'm afraid he is. I wouldn't put it past him to outpace us either." With those words, Ancel spurred his horse and headed toward the northernmost gate.

Several uneventful hours later, they stopped along the white

snake of a route. A swirling wind brought sprinkles of snow and the clear, clean scent of uninhabited land draped in winter's cloak. Trees lined the road, their skeletal, frost-laden limbs thrusting across the group's path or praying to the blue sky. Icicles hung from them, jeweled daggers sparkling with the sun's glint. Ryne unwrapped dried beef and bread from the saddlebags on Ancel's stallion while Mirza prepped a fire near several logs. After Ryne dished out a portion for each of them, they sat warming themselves as they ate and drank steaming cups of herb tea Kachien made.

A growl rumbled deep in Charra's throat from where he lay next to the fire. His ears pricked up, and he gazed off toward the Greenleaf Forest.

"We're being followed," Mirza said.

"Hmmm." Ryne swilled the tea in his mouth then swallowed. "I thought Charra and I were the only ones who noticed." He gave Mirza a respectful nod.

"Two men on our left," Kachien said. "Another two on the right."

"Don't forget the one ahead of us." Ancel pondered why the clansmen would be trailing them this far from the mountains or from Eldanhill or following them at all for that matter. "Mountain men. Nema." He shrugged at the curious looks his companions gave him. "Charra came back smelling like another daggerpaw."

"Good." Mirza drew his spear next to his leg. "If any wolves pick up our trail, they'll go after them first. Unless of course, they decide our horses are easier meat." He smiled wickedly.

"I worry about you sometimes, Mirz."

"In that regard, you're better than me. I worry about me all the time."

"What if they try to stop us?" Kachien took a sip from her cup. "They have been told not to let anyone approach the winery."

"Since when?" Ancel furrowed his brows.

"Your father gave the order some time ago. Galiana told me not to let you go there either."

"Good luck stopping him when his mind is set." Mirza picked up a rock. "This stone … his head. Same thing."

Kachien smiled. "Which is why I did not bother to mention it."

"Why wouldn't they want me to visit the winery?"

Ryne unfolded his legs and stood. "It's the place where you gained your Etchings and lost your mother. The one place where your emotions may overwhelm you."

"So if you know this, why take me there?"

"I told you, I needed to see the *divya*."

Ancel sensed Ryne was hiding something. "And? What aren't you telling me?"

"I need to see just how much control you have."

Ancel narrowed his eyes as Ryne avoided his gaze. "Fine, I'll leave it to you to tell me everything when we get there."

Ryne took a deep breath. "I have a suspicion about this *divya* of yours, but I need to see it to be certain."

"Fair enough."

"What are we waiting for then?" Spear in one hand, Mirza stood and brushed snow from his leather pants with the back of his other hand that still held the small rock. "Let's get this over with and head back home. These Nema are beginning to annoy me." He threw the rock toward a snowy mound. The mound grunted and gave a slight shift. "You're lucky that wasn't my spear," he yelled.

They mounted and left. Not more than thirty feet farther on, a Nema clansman, clad all in furs to match his surroundings, stepped from within the trees.

The man held up a stump of an arm. "Hold dere." A daggerpaw loped out from the woods to stand next to him.

"We're simply passing through to my parents' winery," Ancel called.

"I know where you're going. I can't allow it."

"Can't or won't?" Ryne stepped up between Ancel and the Nema.

Half a dozen more of the clansmen emerged from the tree line. Opposite them, two more slipped from behind an unusually big snow mound.

Bone hackles hardening to match the Nema's daggerpaw, Charra growled. The rasp of steel on leather came from Kachien who now held her two daggers and controlled her mount with her legs. Mirza had stabbed his spear into the ground, unlimbered his bow, nocked an arrow, and aimed at the mountain men.

"Orders," the Nema said. "You understand dis. When de finders give an order, you obey."

Ancel frowned. "My father gave you these orders?"

"De finders, but dat don't matter. Turn back before we make you."

Ancel didn't see Ryne move. One moment, the giant was standing between him and the Nema, and the next, he loomed over the man. The daggerpaw growled. Ryne sent the beast flying with a lazy wave of his hand. Spears and axes rose in the hands of the other clansmen.

Ryne snatched the leader by the throat and lifted him off his feet. The words Ryne uttered were in the Nema's guttural tongue, each word ending in a snarl as if he wanted to hawk and spit.

The mountain men froze, weapons held above their shoulders. Slowly, they lowered them.

Ryne's scathing words continued for a few moments. He dropped

the Nema on his ass when he finished.

The clansman scrambled away on his hands and knees, his stump struggling for purchase in the snow. When he finally stood, he bowed profusely to Ryne. His fellows repeated the gesture.

"We'll be fine from now on," Ryne said, returning to the group.

"What did you say?" Kachien asked. "And how is it you speak their tongue."

"I told them a little bit of their history, among other things. I also told him the next time he threatened my ward, I would skin him." Ryne bared his teeth. "There's all kinds of stories about what us Eztezians eat. As for their language, a better question would be if there's a tongue I don't know." Lips curling into a smug smile, he headed up the road.

Ancel stood in awe, watching Ryne's back before he remembered to cluck to his horse and follow.

The afternoon sun bathed them in its meager warmth as the winery drew within sight. Memories of the night when the black-armored man dragged his mother from the burning ruins rushed back to Ancel. If he strained, he was certain he'd be able to smell the smoke from the conflagration. He took a deep breath of fresh air and drove the thoughts from his mind.

The path wormed its way between the hills before opening up into an expanse of flat land blanketed in snow. The Greenleaf Forest grew to the western edge of the property. Encased in an icy grip on the eastern side were the vast kinai orchards. Remnants of several buildings lay under mounds of powdery fluff. Blackened timbers and the soot-covered walls offered a stark contrast.

A silver spire rose from among the rubble. No snow or ice clung to its surface. No char sullied its shine.

As peculiar as the polished metal appeared, the area around the spire itself was stranger still. Not only had someone cleared the debris near the structure, but the fifty foot swath of land was barren, devoid of any signs of life, its soil darker than the building's charred remains.

"What is that thing?" Mirza asked.

"A *divya*," Ancel replied.

"A better question is who cleared the area, and who made those?" Ryne pointed toward footprints in the snow. They led several hundred feet away until they disappeared into the kinai orchards.

"The clansmen?" Ancel offered, but even he was skeptical.

Kachien swung down from her saddle. She landed knee deep in snow and slogged through it until she reached the edge of the area where the first tracks began. There, she bent and inspected the prints, lifting her head every now and then to gaze along the path they

marked. Seemingly satisfied, she stood and used the route she made to return to them. “Not the mountain men. They wear broad leather boots covered with furs. Those tracks are smaller, precise, which means a richer, more professional cut.”

Ancel immediately scanned his surroundings, making certain they hadn’t missed anything or anyone, but he picked out nothing else out of the ordinary. He frowned at Charra who continued to stay close to them. It wasn’t like him. The daggerpaw usually went his own way. “Something isn’t right.” He eased his hand to his sword hilt as a nagging itch of someone watching them slid up his spine.

“Really?” Mirza’s eyes darted nervously from side to side. “I mean, there’s only a weird *divya* that no one but your parents seemed to know about and strange footprints. Not to mention the lurking clansmen.”

“Besides that.” Ancel cocked his head to one side, shoulders tightening.

The wind moaned among the trees, kicking up swirls of snow. Branches clicked against each other like bones adding a haphazard beat to the gust’s dirge. To the north, the Whitewater Falls was a distant roar. Mirza’s horse snorted. Their breathing was the only other sound.

“It’s too quiet. Do what you came here for.” Ancel said to Ryne. He took his bow from his back and nocked an arrow.

“I need a fire first,” Ryne said. “A big one. You two keep watch while Kachien and I collect wood.”

Ryne and Kachien set about gathering any loose timber nearby. They ventured to the Greenleaf’s edge several times. A half hour later, Ryne signaled that they had enough. The piled wood reached up to his waist.

A flick of Ryne’s hand and the wood burst into fire. The wind picked up, fanning the flames until they licked and soared, their heat melting the nearby snow. For Ancel, the temptation to dismount and warm himself near the flames grew near unbearable. He backed up his horse as the heat grew to blistering proportions. Ryne, however, stood near the blaze as if the heat did not touch him. No sweaty sheen showed on his brow or arms. Eyes narrowing, Ancel picked out the shifting Etchings as they rolled across Ryne’s skin like a multicolored snake emerging from its den.

“Be ready for anything.” Ryne strode to the fire’s far side. He took three massive leaping bounds and flew through the air, a living rainbow in the shape of man. He landed with a crunch among the black soil ten feet from the spire.

The *divya* lit up like a lance of blue-tinged lightning. A thunderous boom followed.

Power washed across Ancel in heated waves. Mounds of dirt blasted out from around the spire. The concussion knocked him sideways off his horse. He crashed into the ground, stars dancing through his vision. Shaking his head, he climbed to his feet with a groan. His horse thrashed in the snow as it struggled to regain its footing. As his sight returned, he glanced toward the *divya*.

Within the backdrop of soil and the luminescence arcing down the spire, Ryne stood encased in a blue nimbus. The power crackled around him.

Another sound reached Ancel, this one akin to a sword slicing empty air.

A chill raced down his spine, bringing bumps along his arms. He recognized the noise. He'd heard it when the black-armored man had opened a portal, and when he himself summoned the netherling.

Across from Ryne, near the tracks leading to the orchards, a horizontal slash appeared in the air. It opened into the shape of an eye before spinning on its axis to a vertical position. Beyond the slash, a city sprang into view as if seen through a nebulous membrane. The streets spanned to various structures, crisscrossing higher and higher until they disappeared in the sky.

From the portal leaped several soldiers garbed in silver armor filigreed in gold or crimson, the Lightstorm insignia on their breasts. Full plate helms hid their faces, leaving only black slits where their eyes should have showed.

Ancel recognized them at once. His breath caught in his throat.

Pathfinders.

Chapter 21

Deep within the Shunyata, the inferno crackling at his back, Ryne ignored the swish of the opening portals, his focus solely on the *divya*. As he suspected, the artifact was a Chainin. With whatever catalyst used, whoever bore a Gift could create incredibly powerful Forgings. Even more so if they also held the correct Key. Ancel's sword was the Key to this one.

He recalled the location of four more. One within Benez's walls in Seti, another not too far south from his current location, one in Cardia, and the last in Everland.

After analyzing this particular *divya*, he understood how the Setian and the Tribunal's members lived countless years. While he'd written the Chronicle of Undeath, the main question within the books was how the Eztezians survived as long as they did. He'd pondered that one constant among them for years on end, but not once did he consider kinai as the source. *Why?* Why didn't he realize what was plain to see? Even when Sakari mentioned how he tapped into Mater around them for vitality as the kinai did at the Spellforge hour, he'd not considered the fruit. He shook his head. The answers to a lifelong question had been before him, and he never acknowledged its presence.

Another question nagged at the back of his mind. Did the Setian or the Tribunal understand the Chainin's primary purpose? The *divya* kept one of the wards on the Kassite intact, and in turn helped to seal the Nether. Activate enough of its power and one risked shattering the respective ward. Whoever had taken Ancel's mother must have known this. They'd pushed the boy until the essences carried him over the edge, and he accepted their power. Coupled with the Key, Ancel had unwittingly broken the ward, releasing Prima essences-the power required by the Nine to rule over men and gods. What creatures were now able to cross unhindered from the Nether and the realms beyond? Ryne shuddered.

Opposite him, beyond the Chainin, soldiers shifted into formations, the inferno reflecting off their armor and weapons. Matii, every one of them. Among their number stood a man and a woman in gold robes with crimson and white along the edges. Stripes lined the sleeves.

The man had no aura.

Ryne grimaced. To the left and right of the High Shin, arrayed in a loose formation, were a dozen others in silversteel armor, their faces hidden behind full helms. Above them flew two battle standards: the Lightstorm and the Golden Road of the Pathfinders.

“Cease whatever you intend,” boomed the man’s voice.

Ryne glanced over his shoulder.

Swords brandished, several of the Tribunal’s Dagodin marched through the snow and took up positions in front of Ancel and the others. Both young men had their bows drawn, fletching to ear. Kachien was shifting from side to side, daggers in hand.

“No.” Ryne faced the High Shin once more.

The auras around the female High Shin and the Pathfinders bloomed brighter. Mater drew together in ever thickening bands. The essences built until they entwined with that already in the air around the Chainin. They formed complete elements, triggering those imbued within the silvery surface. Light flared from the *divya*, followed by a thunderous crack. The power amplified tenfold.

“The time is now,” whispered the voice of malevolence within the essences.

“Use our power as you will,” said the softer voice that often advised caution.

“We are yours,” added a third, deeper yet more insistent resonance.

“You *are* mine,” Ryne stressed. He linked the heat of the bonfire with the bands of essences, and then forced that power into his Etchings depicting the sun’s eternal flames. “High Shin … Pathfinders! You are aware of what I hold. Return the way you came or burn.”

Shocked expressions abounded. The man simply looked on. The Tribunal’s Matii hesitated for a moment before they again pulled on more of the elements.

Smiling, Ryne accepted their gift. The power roiled up into him in a searing wave. He concentrated on the Chainin. “Heat to balance metal. Heat to evoke passion. Passion is unrelenting.”

“No!” yelled the male High Shin.

Behind him, Ryne heard multiple crackles and swishes. Portals opening and closing. He unleashed the essence of the Streams he’d summoned when he invoked heat’s Tenet.

Liquid flame shot out from an Etching on his arm in the shape of a bird. The conflagration grew to the size of a house. Its wings cast shadows like gigantic blades, the wind when they flapped buffeting him. The representation of the essence enveloped the Chainin.

The silversteel *divya* began to melt, collapsing into itself. A thick puddle of slag formed, steam rising off its surface in hissing spurts.

Heated blasts washing over him in ever-increasing amounts, Ryne chanted, “Cold to balance fire. Cold to evoke temperance. Temperance is all encompassing.”

Another essence of the Streams swept forth, this from the Etchings of the great North, its snows, icy expanses, and frozen peaks.

A miniature mountain with shining eyes grew next to Ryne. When it reached its full height, it spanned thirty feet. Like an avalanche, the summons swallowed the flames and the heat. Liquid metal pooled on the black soil and cooled. The flow became a trickle before it stopped altogether, frozen solid.

Ryne released his hold on his Matersense and staggered from the protective zone around what remained of the Chainin. Body shivering from the sudden, immense cold, he keeled over onto something soft. When he finally managed to focus, he realized he'd fallen face first into snow. A shadow fell across his face.

"What happened?" The shadow resolved into Ancel, eyes wide with awe, fear, and concern.

"T-The flames d-didn't generate enough e-energy …" Ryne hugged himself to calm the spasms, "to properly summon the essences of fire. I had to use my own body heat." He'd known the risk when he tried. Neither heat nor cold belonged to him, and his use of them was restricted. The High Shin, or whatever he was, had left him no choice. Better to destroy the Chainin than allow it to fall into the wrong hands.

"Take it easy," Ancel said. "We can rest here if you need to."

Ryne waved him closer. "No. We can't. I think the Chainin was the only reason the Tribunal hasn't attacked Eldanhill yet. With your mother gone, I suspect they wanted to use the *divya* for themselves and find out if anyone else in your town could harness its power."

"Then why did you destroy it?"

"I … we can't afford to let them have it." Ryne gasped for breath. Using two Forges of that magnitude at once while feeding the essences his own sela left him drained. "The Exalted wish to rival the gods. They will do whatever it takes, including kill any that stand in their way."

"Well, we can't carry you."

"In the bags, there's kinai juice," Ryne wheezed. "Bring it for me."

Ancel left and returned moments later with a waterskin. Ryne gulped down the contents, some of the sweet juice dripping on his cheek, neck, and down his chest. His Etchings shifted to absorb the spillage.

The energy and Mater imparted from kinai surged through him. His back arched with the rush of pain and ecstasy it brought. The effect would only be temporary. Combined with the trek to Ancel, this Forging had cost him more sela than was wise to use. The essences stored within his Etchings were almost depleted. He needed an Entosis as soon as possible.

He pushed to his knees, paused to gather himself, and then he stood. "I'll be fine for now. It will be a while before the elements in

this area are stable enough for the Tribunal to Materialize here again. Unless they use some other location, that buys us maybe a day. Regardless, if they're smart, they will come here first to see what happened to the Chainin and who controls it."

"They'll be able to see it's gone if they come from anywhere north of here," Mirza said.

Ryne glanced toward the Kelvore's jagged fangs where they disappeared into the clouds and mists. The young man was right. Unless.

He linked with Ancel, this time not simply to communicate, but the full connection.

Ancel's eyes shot open.

"Don't panic," Ryne said in Ancel's head. *"Relax. Seek the Eye."* He saw through his ward's eyes. In turn, Ancel could do the same. *"Your Etching is mainly heat and light, but there's a bit of the Forms within it. Most Etchings contain a part of the Forms as that helps to shape everything."*

Features smoothing, Ancel nodded.

"Good. Now, from the Eye choose the emotions that correspond to your Etchings, to the Streams." He felt Ancel tap into his passion, his aggression, his despair, his love.

Ancel's face contorted with strain, but he did not give up.

"Eaaaasy, allow the Eye to do its work. Let the essences feed on your sela as they need." He waited a moment until Ancel's features relaxed. *"Now, dip into the Forms."*

Ancel drew on his stubbornness, his steadfastness. The boy had that to spare in droves to go along with his will.

Ryne smiled at the way Ancel grasped the concepts so easily. The continual practice had paid off. *"In your mind, picture the Chainin. Exactly how it looked. Delve into what's left. Connect to the Forms that created the divya, and those of the earth beneath it."*

Eyes closed, Ancel's brow furrowed tightly.

"Excellent. Remember, for any Forging to work, there must be a base, a model of sorts for the essences to draw upon. A source of heat for fire or cold for ice. Once you have a model, you then add or subtract, using the essences to create the Forge you want. Now, holding the image, tell your Etching to construct what you see."

Moments passed and nothing happened. Then, the ground rumbled.

A smooth-sided earthen spire rose up from beneath the melted metal. The silversteel toppled to one side with a resounding crash. When the construct reached the appropriate height, it stopped.

Ryne smiled. Ancel was better than he dreamed.

"The metal is malleable. Think of what you saw before and cover your

construct's surface."

Screeching and bending, the noise grating against his ears, the metal rose and wrapped around the earthen spire. It became identical to the real *divya*.

Ryne broke his link. His vision receded to only his once more.

Sweat pouring down his brow, Ancel panted heavily.

Kachien and Mirza gawked at the new structure, their gazes shifting from Ancel to Ryne.

"Perfect." Ryne beamed. "Congratulations. You have created your first construct and completed your first major class in Materforging using your Etchings."

Chapter 22

Darkness came early to Whitewater Falls and Eldanhill as it often did this time of year. The sky bled orange and pink. Shadows lengthened and prowled the land. Through the looking glass, Shin Galiana watched the changes from where she stood before the half-open, stained glass window on the Streamean Temple's topmost floor. Next to her, Irmina wrung her hands, her expectant gaze locked on the northeast.

Any Matii with enough power felt the elements unleashed earlier. The Forges originated from two locations Galiana knew well. One was from the glen Stefan and his cohort marched off to that morning. The other came from the direction of Stefan's old home. The latter had been far more powerful. Ryne's request for kinai made sense now. He'd gone, most likely taking Ancel with him, to the *divya* at the winery.

Did he use the boy to activate the Chainin once again? If so, for what purpose? She dismissed any need for him to lengthen his life. Being an Eztezian negated such a possibility. Who he was should have lent her comfort, but instead she couldn't help the uneasiness prickling at her thoughts. His race had broken much of the world before. What would he do with such power as the Chainin held?

One problem at a time, she reminded herself. *Deal with the issues you can handle.*

Her thoughts swung to Stefan, his Dagodin cohort, and the dozen men and women with him powerful enough to be Ashishin. A few of them once were. In fact, some among those had been Alzari and after that, Setian. She sighed. Her people had lost so much. What had once been a title of honor was now no more than a handful of assassins and fighters who wielded a fraction of their former power and were exiled to ravaged clanholds. The Tribunal had altered the Alzari's true history in all the Iluminus' records. Outside in the world, the Devout spread the same teaching. Now, the name Alzari referred to the outcasts, the half-breeds like Kachien. The Setian might be alive, but little existed of their proud heritage.

Yet, here in Granadia, they found a new life in the Mysteras. With Stefan once again leading, there might still be hope. So why did she feel this knot in her gut? The crawling fear that told her something was horribly wrong?

Both parties should have returned already. To make matters worse, the eagles she sent out to the glen had not come back either. None of this boded well, so she had prepared.

Dagodin lined Eldanhill's walls, interspersed with any other Matii

strong enough to Forge. Torches highlighted their forms, set every few feet for easy access to the archers. Several bonfires illuminated the Seifer, Nema and other soldiers waiting inside the ramparts. Even from where she stood, the odor of burning pitch was strong. The remainder of the folk not related to the Setian were well on their way to Old Paltz. They would continue on to Descane and take a ferry across to Dosteri lands. Their exodus gave her a sense of relief.

The shadows continued to lengthen, the colors in the sky giving way to ghostly hues with the rising of Denestia's twin moons.

AWOOOOOOO! The sudden wail of a horn jarred her.

Two more short reports followed, then another longer bray. Eldanhill's Dagodin were returning.

Her breath caught and her heart skipped a beat as she waited. Another short blast meant they had been victorious.

AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

She hissed. The men were in trouble.

From below rose shouted commands and barked orders. Galiana strained her eyes in the direction of the horns. They blared again, two more long notes, somewhere northwest within the Greenleaf, not far from its edge.

Several flaming arrows lit up the dark sky. Aided by Forges, they flew farther and faster than any bow could manage. At the perimeter of the forest, they bloomed, lighting the trees and the fields.

Dagodin galloped from among the ice-covered woods. Galiana began to count, but stopped as she realized how few they were. Many of the mounts carried two soldiers. Another group on foot ran from the tree line.

Stefan Dorn brought up their rear. He stopped and the men on foot with him. Each one wielded a bow.

A keening wail echoed from the woods. Howls quickly followed. Galiana's mouth dried. An ear-splitting shriek made her cover her ears. *What in Ilumni's name…?*

Stefan and those on foot formed a line. Wielding a gigantic longbow as tall as himself, he drew fletching to ear and loosed. The other archers did the same, firing in concert.

Galiana let her gaze follow the flight of arrows by the power imbued into them. They shot among the trees and disappeared.

Hollow booms resonated moments later. The forest lit up as miniature explosions toppled trees and kicked up bursts of snow.

A gasp escaped her lips.

Blackness boiled within the woods. Shadelings by the thousands advanced, their bodies rippling like an undulating, obsidian serpent.

Another volley from the archers. Another series of explosions. Then they turned and ran for Eldanhill's walls.

“They won’t make it if we don’t do something,” Irmina cried.

“We will. Link with me.”

Galiana felt the power Irmina already held reach out and touch hers. The essences caressed, then became one.

Through the link, Galiana led Irmina to what she wanted. The other woman responded as if she’d done it a thousand times. Galiana shrugged off her initial surprise and continued.

Within the stones of the Streamean Temple, she and Thania Dorn had worked for years to store light essences, imbuing them into the rock as the workers constructed the building. Now, she called on that power. Mater flooded up into her in an incandescent torrent. When she gazed over at Irmina, the younger woman’s eyes glowed.

Galiana directed the Streams across town to its counterpart: Eldanhill’s ramparts. From there she reached farther, to the next connection: the pillars that appeared to be simple supports for an unfinished wall or fence encircling Eldanhill. The builders had hewn the bricks from stone that belonged to the same quarry.

Irmina sucked in a breath. “You recreated the Forging used in message maps for the Heralds.”

“Yes. A twist, just like so, and it becomes a defensive weapon.”

The first shadelings crossed the tree line. Wraithwolves put their snouts to the air and howled. Back and forth in front of them, the smoky forms of darkwraiths sped, holding the beasts in check. Shadowy forms alighted from the sky, followed by piercing wails. Several dozen daemons landed on spindly legs, insect-like wings flitting so rapidly they were a blur. Their tentacles uncoiled from around their heads like a mass of black ropes.

An ear-rending screech pealed once more.

The shadelings charged.

The Dagodin archers along the walls fired. Arrows rose in an arc, before falling among the shadelings. Explosions rocked the ground, sending up snow and earth, bodies and blood.

Undaunted, the wraithwolves and their nebulous counterparts stretched onward in a black wave, washing over the fields. They howled and screeched as some fell, but their charge did not so much as pause. The daemons watched. Galiana refused to think on the reason they waited.

The fleeing Dagodin looked back, desperately trying to reach the walls. Most of those on horseback had already made it to the gates.

Galiana triggered the Forging.

Eldanhill’s walls lit up. A blue luminance flew from them straight out to the pillars like the metal spokes of a wagon-wheel, the town at its center. For thousands of feet around Eldanhill, the ethereal glow bathed the ground and air.

Stefan and his archers retreated inside the pillars.

"Release," Galiana said.

The light thrummed, shot out from the Streamean Temple, into the walls, then from there, into the pillars. With a great whoosh, the luminescence ricocheted into the sky from the pillars in a steady bar, joining each spoke. When the circle closed, a glowing wall surrounded Eldanhill, stretching up to cast its glare into the clouds.

When the first shadelings struck the barrier, they disintegrated.

The soldiers along the ramparts cheered. Fists and weapons pumped into the air.

The earlier scream pierced their triumphant cries. This time, the shadelings stopped, many loping back and forth near the barrier before they fled to the Greenleaf Forest.

"Come," Galiana said, breathing labored, shoulders and feet heavy. "There will be plenty who need mending."

Irmina took one last look toward the northeast before she nodded.

As they made their way down the stairs, Galiana asked, "So do you care to explain how you knew where Ancel went?"

Irmina hesitated for a moment before answering, "Ever since the night in Castere when I tapped into a Matersurge to help Ryne defeat the shade, I've had this pinprick in my mind that comes and goes. It's similar to how I identify a beast I've tamed, yet different. Somehow it felt familiar, but …" She paused. "I always suspected, but it wasn't until … until after last night when I spent time with him again that I knew for certain what I had felt was him."

Galiana's breath caught in her throat. She'd read about this affinity in Stefan's Chronicle of Undeath, but not once in all her years did she encounter anyone who could corroborate the telling.

"Now, it's stronger," Irmina said. "Not constant but I sense him more often."

"Do you think he can feel you?"

"I–I don't know."

They gained the second landing with its massive archway and continued their descent. Pictures carved into the walls depicted the gods of the Streams-Ilumni, Amuni, Bragni, and Rituni, all engaged in different battles. Galiana wondered how long it would be before what was happening now culminated with the breaching of the Nether's seals and these same gods crossing the Planes into the worlds once more. The thought brought a chill to her old bones. She pulled her cloak around her and leaned on her staff.

"At least you know he lives," Galiana said.

Irmina nodded, but the tight lines about her face didn't lessen.

They proceeded the rest of the way in silence. When they reached the area before the walls, Ashishin were already tending to the

wounded. Galiana's heart fell. Of the full cohort, four hundred strong, maybe only forty had survived.

Face haggard, his armor ripped in several places, Stefan approached. "They were waiting for us."

"Did you make it into the glen?" Galiana asked.

"No. Wraithwolves guarded the entrance from this side." He took a deep breath. "We would have taken them too … if not for the man."

Galiana frowned. "Not the same one from-"

"No, not the one who took Thania. This man was different. He stood near the entrance also. I could've sworn he was looking directly at where we hid. The strangest thing about him was that each Dagodin reported as seeing a different person. He seemed inconsequential, friendly almost, like a person you would immediately take to. I snuck closer and fired my bow when he wasn't looking. H-He turned to the arrow and … and a black tentacle snatched it out of the air."

Irmina made a choked sound.

"You know him?" Galiana asked.

Irmina nodded numbly. "I believe so. If he's who I think, he should be dead. I killed him at Castere."

The Streamean Temple's bell tolled.

"More shadelings?" Stefan shouted to the tower above him.

"Riders, sir!" yelled a Dagodin. "Coming from the northeast along the Eldan Road. Also a daggerpaw and the giant on foot."

"It's them," Irmina exclaimed.

Stefan snarled. "Tell me that's not Ancel."

"It is," Galiana replied.

He rushed toward the gates.

Galiana ran to the nearest tower, climbed in the wooden basket and yelled for the Dagodin above to haul her up. Rocking back and forth, the contraption ascended until it passed through the hole in the tower's floor. Galiana scrambled out and stared across the field.

There, riding hard for Eldanhill, hooves kicking up water and snow were three figures. Behind them, Ryne's gigantic form and Charra's whitish blur were unmistakable. Several mountain men on draught horses were pursuing.

Galiana frowned. *Why-?* A scream from below cut off her question.

The ring of clashing steel and the pained cries of men and beasts echoed. Below the walls, clansmen were attacking Ashishin, striking down a few before they realized what happened. In some spots, mountain men battled each other.

The entire area seethed as Dagodin and soldiers joined the fray. The twang of bowstrings brought Galiana's attention back to the

archers next to her and their targets beyond the wall. Several clansmen were sprinting toward the newly Forged barrier and the pillars that gave it life.

Chapter 23

Irmina parried the Nema's attack. The impact of his axe vibrated up her arms. She didn't dare Forge. In quarters this close, the risk of hurting one of the defenders was too great.

She shifted slightly, making her body a smaller target. The clansman swung his axe in a wide arc. A quick duck under the blow allowed her to ram her sword up into his throat. The point tore up through his mouth. She yanked the blade out. Gurgling blood, he collapsed.

Spinning, she sought another victim, but most of the mountain men were already down or engaged with other soldiers. The twang of bowstrings drew her attention to the towers. Archers were firing beyond the wall. At the gate, Stefan's bow work was a blur as he nocked and fired in quick succession, hardly pausing in between.

The familiar sense of a mind mired in fear and worry, yet remaining calm, touched hers. *Ancel.* She rushed to the gate and out.

Across the fields, members of both Nema and Seifer clans ran toward the barrier. Arrows struck some, and a few among them fell. Those not dead struggled to their feet to stagger on.

His face a mask of concentration, Stefan continued to shoot, each arrow flying true. Each of his targets dropped, never to rise again.

But the hail of arrows from Stefan and the Dagodin weren't enough. The clansmen and their pets steadily gained on the barrier and pillars.

In desperation, Irmina reached her mind out to the closest animal. A daggerpaw. Focused as it was on its current task, she met little resistance as she slid into its mind. The beast issued a confused snarl before she waded through its heightened senses and primal emotions. Sifting through the murk of its thoughts, she located the leaders for both the daggerpaws and the wolves by their musty reek.

Weary from the earlier Forging, she took a deep breath, stiffened her back, and spread her senses out to the other animals. When she found the ones she sought, she eased from the daggerpaw's awareness, split her thoughts in two, and forced her consciousness into theirs. She found where the clansmen overrode the will of their pets and ripped control from them. Her commands spilled forth in a series of images.

Kill your masters.

A chorus of howls and roars soared above the clash of steel, the hum of bowstrings, and the strained grunts of men. Wolves and daggerpaw alike fell upon any clansman intent on destroying the barriers. Screams cut off in dying gurgles and whimpering cries as the beasts tore out throats and savaged bodies. Once they began, there

would be no turning back.

Irmina left the beasts to their grizzly work and gazed out to where Ancel and the others galloped toward the barrier. Ryne's huge form bounded along with them just as she remembered from Carnas, this time sloshing through snow as if it didn't exist. Chasing not far behind were several clansmen.

An earsplitting screech echoed once more. Shadeling wails answered.

The creatures near the tree line finally noticed the incoming riders. They raced across the empty fields, closing fast.

Irmina's heart sped up as the riders approached the glowing barrier. The shadelings were less than thirty feet away now. Ancel was whipping on his reins. Together, all of them passed through the luminance.

She let out a relieved whoosh. She should have known Galiana would have the foresight to attune the barrier to affect shadelings only.

The mountain men in pursuit weren't as lucky or as fast. The shadelings tore into them as they tried either to make the barrier or turn to flee the way they'd come. A wave of black fur and billowing forms washed over them.

Heads down, the three rode hard for the gates with Ryne and Charra flanking them. Irmina and Stefan retreated inside and waited with everyone else. Stefan's face was haggard and strained.

The group passed through the wide doorway. A windlass cranked; the gate rumbled shut.

Heart racing, she resisted the urge to run and fling herself into Ancel's arms. He dismounted and took in his father's glare with a shake of his head and slumped shoulders. Charra sniffed at the dead men inside the walls.

"What happened out there?" Galiana asked as she joined them.

Ancel told their story. When he spoke about the *divya*, the High Shin and the Pathfinders, Irmina narrowed her eyes. Control of the artifact had to be the reason the Tribunal wanted her to get rid of the council.

Guthrie stepped up among them, face mired in worry. "You do realize the clans were yours, Stefan, or were supposed to be."

Stefan opened his mouth and then closed it as he took in the dead clansmen and those held under watch by the Dagodin and soldiers. Finally, he said, "I never suspected any of this. Not from them."

She'd been so involved in worrying about Ancel and the fight, Irmina had forgotten Ryne's revelation at the council meeting. The other members gathered, whispering amongst each other while shooting furtive glances Stefan's way.

“You can’t be serious,” Stefan said, his tone an angry hiss, but his face showing more hurt than anything.

For some odd reason, despite her previous feelings, Irmina sympathized with the man. All those years ensuring his people’s safety, only to be distrusted when the shade reappeared among them. The price of keeping secrets.

“There are three factions at work within the mountain men,” Ryne announced. “One serves the shade, one serves the Tribunal, and one is with you. The issue is weeding out the traitors.”

“How are you so sure one serves the Tribunal,” Galiana asked. “Ancel said himself they were following his father’s orders.”

“I spoke to them.” Ryne shrugged. “It was the accent that confused Ancel. The man said finder’s orders, not Father’s. The Pathfinders. From the tracks, they’ve been there a while. I believe they were prepping the Chainin for some Forging.”

Irmina noted Galiana’s slight twitch at Ryne’s mention of the *divya*’s name. The reason dawned on her then. It must have been what Thania used to extend their lives. “So what happens now?”

“I destroyed it,” Ryne answered. “Something so powerful shouldn’t be in the hands of common folk.”

Galiana’s lips curled, but she said nothing.

“You realize this means the Tribunal will resort to its old ways. Starting wars, using raiders and slavers for the sake of death to maintain their own youth.” Stefan’s voice was calm, but underneath Irmina could tell he seethed.

“Better that than the alternative. Who’s to say they ever stopped that practice anyway,” Ryne said. “Right now though, you have another issue. A bigger one if what I saw and heard on my way rings true.”

Irmina hissed as she remembered Stefan’s words concerning the glen and the stranger. “It may be worse than you think. Either Sakari’s alive or there’s another just like him.” She repeated Stefan’s report. Oddly enough, Ryne didn’t appear surprised, doing little more than nodding as she relayed the news.

“Who’s this Sakari?” Galiana asked.

“My old bodyguard … a netherling.”

A chorus of shocked whispers echoed from those close enough to hear.

“What worries me more than him is what’s out there with him.”

Irmina frowned. *What could be worse than Sakari being alive and a netherling?*

“Sakari, I would be able to fight. Barely.” Ryne’s voice became distant.

The screech that sounded like metal scraping against metal came

once more, scrawling across Irmina's skin.

"That is what I'm afraid of. It's the cry of a vasumbral. In ancient days, the Skadwaz used them to devour entire cities. They feed on Mater and provide that power to whoever controls them." His gaze locked on the barrier.

"Oh Ilumni," Irmina uttered. "If that's true, we've given them a feast."

"Where would such a creature come from?" Ancel asked.

"Hydae," Ryne said.

Silence hung over them. Utter disbelief fluttered across Galiana's face. "But wouldn't the wards on the Kassite have to be broken for the beast to cross?"

"Yes," Ryne answered, still holding Ancel's gaze. "When Ancel Forged using the Chainin, he broke a ward and weakened one of the Nether's seals."

Chapter 24

Heart sinking into the bowels of his stomach, Ancel shook his head in denial. Ryne had to be mistaken. *I destroyed one of the Kassite's wards? I weakened one of the Nether's seals? I possibly exposed Denestia to dangers the world had not seen in millennia? Stuff of legend and myth, much of it not even told in the stories?* He cringed, picturing the destruction he possibly wrought.

Most faces around him displayed pity. All except Kachien's and Mirza's. Kachien's expression was of genuine concern. Mirza's eyes smoldered, and his clenched fist shook.

"All you Ashishin make me sick," Mirza said. A few people gasped at the disrespect. "You get your hooks in a man, and you don't let go. My father, my mother, now my best friend." He hawked and spat. "All the world is a plot to you … a great game to be played, and we," he cast his hand out, "the pieces to string along. Well, you know what? Fuck you. Fuck you all. I'm here for my friend, my family, and my people. If it takes me until my dying day, I'll see them free." He stalked off.

Ancel ached to walk away also, leaving the dead and dying, the stench of blood and burning pitch, the suffering, the lies … all of it behind if he could, but if things were as Ryne said-he had no reason to doubt the man-this was his responsibility. He held himself straighter, molding his spine into steel. "How do we kill them?"

Ryne smiled, a hint of pride in the way his lips curled. "Simple as that?"

"Death's always simple." Ancel recalled the saying from the Chronicle of Undeath. "Aren't those your words?"

"Indeed."

"How do you fight something that devours the power which drives the world?" Stefan arched an eyebrow.

Ryne touched his sword hilt. "With steel. Mater can't touch the creatures as far as Forging goes, but simple metal, imbued or not, will do the task."

"And how do we get close enough?" This from Guthrie.

"First, we must discover how many of the beasts Sakari commands," Ryne answered. "Right now, the best course is to flee, but to do so we need a distraction. It's the only way to buy time to get your people free of this place and for me to scout them out."

"If he even allows us," Irmina said.

"Why can't we leave like the Tribunal's Matii did?" Ancel asked.

"Only two people here are strong enough to be High Shin." Ryne's eyes shifted from Irmina to Galiana. "Two High Shin alone couldn't

hold portals long enough for everyone. And the Tribunal would know where we Materialized to anyway. To make things worse, we don't have enough Dagodin to defeat the creatures, but if we had more Matii we could keep them occupied for most of you to escape. Vasumbrals are glutinous by nature. As long as there's a chance of a Forging, they will remain."

Irmina spoke up. "I may know how to get some more Matii … a lot more."

All attention shifted to her. Galiana wore a pensive frown.

"I'm sorry," Irmina mouthed to him. She inhaled and then blew out a slow breath, her shoulders drooping. "I was sent her by the Exalted." That brought a hiss from Galiana. "As a Raijin, my task was to kill the council." Her gaze hardened. "And to kill you, Ryne."

Her intentions came as no great surprise to Ancel. The way she cried the night they made love had left him suspecting something of this nature. Ryne nodded as if he expected no less. Stefan tensed. Lips pursed, Guthrie shook his head slowly. Devan placed himself firmly between Irmina and Shin Galiana, looming over her as he did so, his fist clenched near his sword. The other council members put more distance between themselves and Irmina, edging closer to the Dagodin out of earshot near the wall.

"When I found out who you were … I couldn't-" Chest heaving, Irmina turned away from them.

Ancel glanced from her to Ryne, narrowing his eyes. What was he missing? There seemed to be more between those two. For a moment, he pondered if they'd been involved, but dismissed the thought. What he witnessed in Irmina's eyes was raw pain. Only one thing ever affected her like this: her parents' death.

Ryne had nothing to do with that. Or did he?

Brushing at her face, Irmina composed herself and faced them once more. "Rest assured, I no longer intend to follow their orders against the council." Her omission of Ryne was troubling. "However, if we need more Matii, the easiest solution is for me to signal the Tribunal that the deed is done. They'll attack within minutes only to find the shadelings outside the walls."

"What if they decide to ignore them and leave us to our fate?" Guthrie asked.

"They may be a lot of things, Guthrie," Galiana leaned up off her staff, "but the Tribunal *will* fight the shade. The threat makes them weaker against the Sendethi and Barsonian rebellion and might be a precursor to their demise if left to fester." She paused for a moment. "To everyone's demise." The last came out a whisper.

"Do we trust her?" Devan nodded to Irmina.

"Yes," Galiana said convincingly, "I do."

“Why?” Guthrie glanced from Galiana back to Irmina.

“She has been an agent for me and Jerem for years. As I said at the inn, she knows now we had nothing to do with her family’s deaths. Besides, Jerem would never allow her to come here if he thought she was a threat to our cause.”

Guthrie gave a slight bow of his head. “I’ll submit to your judgment then.”

Devan shrugged and went back to stand next to Stefan.

“So,” Ryne stretched to his full height, “prepare the people to leave and send the signal.”

Galiana stood erect now and looked around at them. “I am staying to greet the Tribunal’s Ashishin when they arrive. Who else?”

“I’ll have to stay to explain myself.” Irmina looked to him with sorrowful eyes.

He wanted to go to her, hug her. Deep inside, he couldn’t help the feeling that fate fought against him. Why did he keep losing the things that mattered the most? He was about to speak when he noticed his father’s expression. It gave him a sinking sensation down in his gut.

“All the council members will remain also,” Stefan declared, “including me.”

Ancel choked back a cry. “Da, you mustn’t do this.” He’d lost his mother, and now he was losing his father too? He clutched his mother’s pendant, his knees weak.

“There isn’t much choice, son. When the Tribunal’s army arrives and we’re gone, they will come after us.”

“But … but, defeating the shade will take some time,” Ancel said. “Maybe enough for us to be long gone.”

Stefan shook his head. “I know the Tribunal well. What we’ve done here, plus your actions at the winery won’t go unpunished. If they don’t find us, they’ll fight the shade, as well as send a contingent with Pathfinders and Ashishin after us.”

As much as he wanted to disagree, Ancel recognized the truth of his father’s words. “Let them stay then.” He nodded toward Javed, Rohan, and the others in desperation. “Come with us. We need you. I need you.”

“No.” Stefan walked over to him and placed a firm hand on his shoulder. “The Setian need you now, son. They are your people. My time’s come and gone. I won’t risk any more lives. I’ve seen enough death, enough of my loved ones reduced to nothing more than husks. I won’t let them suffer anymore, not when I can prevent it.”

“Da-”

“Son, listen to me. This has been coming for centuries. A time existed when I thought I would be the one to bring us together once more, but that’s your job now. You were named after your brother and

sister, Anton and Celina, as a way for me never to forget the suffering I have been a part of. The Tribunal's actions and Nerian took them away from us. In ways, I played my part as did your mother, and I've had to live with that knowledge." His father's face was grim, and then he cracked a smile. "I promise to tell you about them one day.

"Your mother and I raised you for this. Ever since those painful days, we prayed, and the gods gave us you. You just needed what we couldn't provide. To be nurtured. To be trained. Now, you have your true mentor." His father glanced over to Ryne. "Use everything me and Galiana taught you, and apply it to what you learn.

"*The Disciplines.* Remember them. Obey them. They'll be your guide. Let today be the prime example. I see fear in you, uncertainty. Demand bravery by conquering your fear. Demand perseverance, but first show determination. You see, son. Even now, I live by two of them. Make all of them a part of your life."

"Da, I can't, I can't …"

"Yes, you can. You're a Dorn. Like all us Dorns, you're strong. The strongest of us all. You'll get past this. Demand they overcome after you prevail. Demand discipline by first showing mastery of self."

Hearing his father's voice so calm, so steadfast, lent Ancel strength. He wiped away the tears he hadn't realized he shed. "Lead by example," he whispered.

"Exactly," his father replied. "Now it's time for us to prepare the troops and gather our people for exodus."

Chapter 25

Ryne stood atop the tower next to two Dagodin with a clear vantage point of the northern expanses around the town. Snow fell in ever thickening swirls. Dark clouds hid Denestia's twin moons, but they made no difference. The barrier around Eldanhill bled its own silvery blue glow onto the land for miles. Beyond the nebulous luminance, shadelings gathered, their forms turning the virginal white of the snowy fields and forest into seething black rot. A vasumbral wailed.

If Sakari was out there, what was he waiting for? The vasumbrals should already be devouring the shield while the shadelings convened. Along the lines, darkwraiths glided back and forth keeping wraithwolves in check. Evenly spaced between those ranks, Ryne picked out the blur of rapidly beating black wings, fleshy locks, mandibles, and the many-faceted eyes of four daemons, their matching legs and arms gesticulating wildly as they passed instructions. Despite their distance from the wall, the fetid stench of death and decay was palpable.

Four daemons meant four shadebanes, each bane divided into a herd controlled by a darkwraith. At four thousand per shadebane against less than five thousand men and women in Eldanhill, the numbers proved more than daunting. They were downright scary.

The sight of Amuni's minions brought the voices of the essences rolling up into his head. His Etchings writhed, forcing the presences back down so he wouldn't need to enter the Shunyata. With what he'd expended destroying the Chainin, relinquishing any of his sela to appease those greedy wretches might be too costly if he planned to help here and live.

The thought of life made him ponder Sakari's possible survival. Contrary to what many believed, netherlings were not immortal. A powerful enough *divya* through the heart or brain could kill them as dead as any other. He could have sworn Irmina's sword through Sakari's chest had struck true. Sakari had opened a portal to the Kassite, but his doom should have been certain.

Tired of speculating, Ryne leaped from the tower and landed softly on the ground forty feet below. He wouldn't find out more before the attack began. Until then, he intended to help while keeping an eye out for Irmina. The woman had made it plain she still intended to kill him, despite knowing her chances were less than slim. He let out a relieved sigh that she still kept his identity a secret. Ancel was too fragile right now to deal with such a revelation.

Irmina's death would be the easiest solution to his dilemma. A

slight smile touched his lips. Funny how his mind returned to what occupied it when he first met the woman. Even so, carrying out the act wasn't an option. The stability she meant for Ancel was a thing he refused to disturb, much less sever.

"Feel like sharing?" Ancel said from next to him.

Carelessness will get a man killed, Ryne thought of his inattention. "Just wondering why they haven't attacked yet and how much time before we leave," he answered, as if aware of his ward's presence the entire time.

"The other council members were bickering about staying, especially when my father decided Galiana would be leaving with us."

"And?"

"My father took out his sword and dared any of them to leave. That pretty much settled it."

Ryne chuckled. So many years later and Stefan was still the same. Whether it was his soldiers or citizens, he took full responsibility, refusing to risk lives foolishly and willing to sacrifice where necessary. Ryne recalled a time the man was different, when all that mattered was glory. Nerian and the Tribunal had killed that Stefan. They'd given birth to a better man.

"How do they plan to escape?"

"That's what I'm here to discuss with you," Ancel said.

"Let me guess … I'm the decoy."

Lips pursed, Ancel gave a slow nod.

"Tell them I say that after I do this we'll need to make a detour on our way to Torandil."

"Are you sure you can manage? When we linked earlier, I could tell how weak you were. I'd rather take our chances, all of us together, than to lose you."

As touching as Ancel's sentiments were, Ryne understood the reality of the situation. Their escape route would be out across the Kelvore River where no wall existed. The shade hadn't covered the area yet, but sooner or later they would. Unless they found something else to chase after first. "Whether I can manage is irrelevant. There's no other way."

Ancel kicked at a patch of snow.

"What they asked isn't all that's bothering you, is it?"

"No." Ancel looked up to meet Ryne's eyes. "Why does Irmina want you dead?"

"Did you ask her?"

"Yes. She said the reason was yours to tell."

Ryne nodded. "So it is, but this is neither the time nor the place."

"Two of the most important people to me want to kill each other, and I can't get a straight answer from either. What's worse is, both of

you are risking your lives for me."

"Who said I wanted to kill her?"

Ancel looked at him askance. "What if she attacks you?"

"Not even then."

Tension drained from Ancel's face. "I'll go tell them you agreed."

The vasumbrals released a keening wail, this time higher and longer.

Ryne tilted his head, judging their distance. "Tell them they only have a few minutes." Snow crunching underfoot, he began to jog toward the northern gate. "The attack is commencing," he called over his shoulder. When he reached the tower to the right of the gate, he shouted for the basket. A wealth of shaking and creaking later, he stood next to the two Dagodin guards.

Out beyond the barrier, a fountain of dirt and snow shot into the air with a dull rumble. The tower itself shook. A hole at least thirty feet across appeared in the snow.

Before the debris hit the ground, a form snaked up, black against the snowfall and tenuous light of the barrier. Rocks, dirt, and snow struck its ridged surface before falling to the wayside. A screech resonated from the silhouette, the sound crawling across Ryne's skin. The dark, wormlike form split down the middle from the top to where it disappeared into the hole, revealing an opening to swallow the night itself. It was not just black; it was an absence of light, a devouring of shadow. The vasumbral made the mass of shadelings beyond it appear bright by comparison. Hundreds upon hundreds of feelers reached out from its interior, sampling the air.

Several thousand feet away, the process repeated. Then again, and again, and again, until Ryne counted a dozen. He understood now why the person controlling them waited. Stretching over a hundred feet into the air and at least a quarter of that distance wide, the creatures were still half-grown.

Ryne sensed a spike of power then. Someone Materializing, a portal opening. First one, two, and then so many at once he lost count. Mater surged from the northeast. The Tribunal's Matii had arrived.

A few of the vasumbrals turned their eyeless forms toward the convergence of elements. The vertebrae joining each section of their bodies glinted where they humped into ridges. Together the beasts screeched, coiled back, and dived down, crashing into the earth with a rumble before their tails pulled out of one hole to disappear into the new ones their heads made. Snow bubbled up into a swell of white waves rolling across the ground in the portals' direction.

Ryne waited, but only the equivalent of two shadebanes followed. The other vasumbrals continued to eat into the barrier. "Leave now," he said to the two guards. "Tell Shin Galiana I said to take everyone

with her." He leapt from the tower over the wall.

A cold wind rushed by his face, sweeping snow in stinging swirls as he fell. Without the benefits of moonlight, he drew on the barrier's luminescence instead and added that to the corresponding element within his Etchings.

He Shimmered.

One moment he was falling, and the next he reappeared at the shield's edge without crossing it. He stepped directly into the glow, his skin tingling slightly as he did so. Light essences raced up into him, his Etchings gobbling them up greedily. Ryne's body replicated the barrier's blue luminance. The prickling sensation increased to a burn. Energy filled him to near busting. He threw his back.

"SAKARI!" he bellowed, using the wind to increase and carry the sound.

Everything stopped as if the entire world had come to a halt. The vasumbrals and shadelings alike turned slowly to him as if of one mind.

A blur of motion announced Sakari's presence. "You called, master?" The smirk on Sakari's face was as out of sorts as his appearance in the form of a typical milk-skinned Granadian.

The essences Ryne held brimmed, leaking from him like blood. "You won't get what you want. Not now. Not ever."

"And what is to stop me and mine?"

Ryne gave the netherling a ghost of a smile. "Yourself. We pose no threat to you."

"Smart, but not smart enough," Sakari said. "I could have sworn a certain someone shot me with an arrow, and another someone stabbed me. Their actions give me the right to breach any contract to defend myself."

The breath Ryne wanted to suck in remained between his clenched teeth. Sakari had deliberately goaded people close to Ancel into attacking him.

"I see you understand. I do not need to fight you to get what I require." Sakari's eyes changed color, going through several hues of blue to gray to black. "As has always happened, you, like the other Eztezians before you, will lose."

"Why are you doing this? The people of this world have done nothing to you or your kind."

"Come now, Ryne." Sakari shrugged. "What drives the world? What drives man? Power. Freedom. Love. A combination of all three or a lack of one or the other. In our case, we simply would love the freedom to use our power."

"So the Nine will destroy an entire people to have something as meager as that?"

“They will destroy whoever stands in our way. Is that not what you and your brethren have done for millennia?” Sakari cocked his head marginally. “We gave you Eztezians the means to deliver the world to us, and not your so-called gods, but too many of you became smarter than was good.”

“Trading one slave master for another was never an option,” Ryne said.

Sakari chuckled. “You cannot fight the inevitable. We can give you the same choice we gave the others though. Join us. Enough of humanity will survive. We do need them, and people to rule, to keep them providing us with what we require.”

“Never.”

“Then I wish you the best of luck, and may your gods help you.” Sakari’s form Blurred away. “But not even they can save you.”

Netherlings. Forever arrogant. Ryne smiled. As always, the chance to gloat, to declare superiority had proved impossible for the netherling. The weakness gave him exactly what he needed.

Coiled in the air from where Sakari had blurred was a concentration of Mater. Stronger than normal, the essences combined to form primal elements almost as potent as those within an Entosis. Ryne delved into the Shunyata, reaching out to the elements before him as he did so. The voices screamed promises of power into his head, and he obliged.

He fed the essences Sakari’s Mater.

The glow around his body grew to a blinding incandescence. The heat built to an inferno raging within him. Ryne’s body trembled with the strain of holding the power in. Allowing the Etchings to help stabilize all he held, he drew in more until he had gained the last bit of residue left by Sakari’s own Forging.

Then he released it all at once.

Light and energy shot into the sky in a cylindrical cone a dozen feet wide. If he had not rooted himself to the earth beneath his feet, the explosion would have thrown him back. Instead, it blew away snow, dirt, debris and everything else before him. Unable to bypass the protective barrier, the power expanded in a semicircle with him at the center. The ground steamed. It smelled of char and wet earth after a rainstorm. Tiny fires fluttered on grass once frozen solid.

“No!” Sakari’s voice bellowed in the distance.

But it was too late. The release of that much Mater had already gained the vasumbrals’ attention. They screeched as one. In response to the issued commands, the shadelings howled and wailed. The ground churned toward Ryne.

Body still aglow, he Shimmered toward the location of the opening portals. When he reappeared, he began sprinting. The

snowfall had become a squall now, but through the winter white, he made out the rolling earth of the vasumbrals snaking to follow him. They ate up the distance between them within seconds until swaths of earth and snow twenty feet tall swept behind him like an ocean heaving in angry throes.

He whipped his head around. Rank upon rank of Dagodin spread before him, armor crimson like fresh blood. Ashishin and High Ashishin stood behind them, portals opening and closing to allow in more of the Tribunal's troops.

Someone yelled a command. In a synchronized dance, the army formed into columns. Gleaming lances pointed toward Ryne and the creatures behind him.

Another command bellowed. Lightning split the sky, striking near Ryne, sending earth and snow showering up. Debris peppered him. Undaunted, he pressed on.

Links bloomed between the Ashishin, spanning from one to the next in continual concentration. They grew until the air itself hummed with their power. He imagined what the scene must look like to them. Some terrible wraith glowing in slivery-blue followed by creatures of the purest black that they had never seen and could not begin to fathom. Not to mention the thousands of howling and wailing shadelings charging in their wake. His lips curled into a smile. The timing needed to be perfect.

The release of Mater from the Shin came in an ear-splitting roar. Whatever Forging they unleashed surged toward him in an overheated torrent from straight ahead and above. The air blazed, the clouds in the heavens lit up, and the ground heaved. Snow and rock melted. Despite the miniature shield around him, his hair began to sizzle, the scent of its burning becoming stronger and stronger.

At the precise moment when the Forging would strike him, and the vasumbrals reach him, he Shimmered. He reappeared among the Ashishin, next to a portal, and stepped through.

He stood in a humongous city square with glowing structures all around and streets that crisscrossed between them while rising in the air. The surprised expressions of troops massing to depart greeted him. *The Iluminus,* he thought as he severed the power he held, his luinance diminishing to nothing.

Chest heaving with exertion, he drew on what reserves he had left before the soldiers reacted. He Materialized and shut the portal behind him so none could follow. The freezing cold that he hardly noticed before sent his body into a spasm of shivers.

Something wasn't right.

He glanced down at his body. His aura spilled about him. Tiny fissures ran up his arm where it leaked. One of the vasumbrals had

touched him and eaten into his Mater.

Sela, his lifeblood, was leaking away.

Chapter 26

Huddled deep within his cloak, head down, Ancel held his reins steady. Snow fell like white rain, before swirling as if it wanted to smother him. The wind's teeth threatened to penetrate even his furs. From near the middle of what moments before had been the slow rush of the Kelvore River, and was now water frozen to the consistency of solid stone, he glanced back toward the glow of the barrier, picturing Eldanhill's lights beyond. At present, he couldn't pick them out; the unnatural winter storm blotted out his home. Under his breath, he muttered a prayer for Ilumni to keep his father, Irmina, and the rest of the council safe. Whatever it took, he promised to see them alive again.

The horse beneath him snorted. To his right, Charra appeared within the swirls as if part of the downfall. Around them, the quickly accumulating precipitation muted the sound of hooves and wagon wheels, and offered better footing than would normally be possible over water frozen by Eldanhill's Matii. Folded within layers of fur and leather, the remainder of Eldanhill's folk and army trudged along.

Dagodin, and what was left of the Seifer and Nema clans, guarded the flanks. Sifting through which among them were the enemy had taken some time, but the mountain men had their own torturous ways to discover the truth. Ancel cringed with the memory of rope tied around privates or to arms and legs and attached to horses pulling in opposite directions. Worse than that was watching a few of the prisoners as wolves or daggerpaws savaged them.

Somewhere behind their convoy, Shin Galiana kept an eye on their rear along with Kachien. Loneliness weighed heavy on Ancel. Even with Mirza's presence next to him, he felt as if he'd lost everything. Mother, Da, Irmina, Ryne. All that was important to him had been torn away. He hunkered deeper into his cloak against the howling wind.

A recollection of Ryne's voice screaming the name Sakari made him shiver. In the moments since, his link with Ryne had flitted around like a buzzing fly before finally settling somewhere well ahead of them. For a while, he'd sensed Mater in unbelievable amounts surge to Eldanhill's north. The last time he'd encountered something similar his mother had been taken, and his father lay at death's brink in Galiana's hospice.

Did his father survive those injuries only to die now? Had he regained Irmina to lose her once again? Could he really trust her to remain true to her word and find a way to keep the council, and more importantly, his father, alive? She'd been adamant that if she wasn't

there to greet the Tribunal they would simply kill whomever they found and pursue him and the others. Thoughts a gray muddle, he sank further into himself and his furs, inhaling their musty odor.

Time crawled by as they continued their exodus, the storm's fury constant, keeping them hidden. When they crossed off the frozen river and up the banks, the swirls of snow abruptly ended. The wind still bit as he looked back. The tempest covered the Kelvore River and beyond, but here several miles before the Red Ridge Mountains, all was calm.

"What in Amuni's name …" Mirza said.

Inclining his head toward the Matii huddled together near the river's edge, Ancel pulled down the scarf from around his mouth. "The storm was all their doing."

Dagodin stood guard near them and helped to usher those on foot up onto the open plain past the riverbank. Several folk stopped to stare in awe as one moment they were walking through a near blinding snowstorm, and the next they were standing with only residual flurries touching them in a light spray. A few dropped to their knees in a brief prayer as if the journey was over.

Ancel knew better. Their trek had just begun.

Caked in an icy layer, Galiana appeared last. Kachien followed close behind.

Galiana threw back her hood and unwound a cloth from around her face. "Set it to hold for a few more hours," she shouted above the wind. "We should be long gone before then."

A Teacher nodded and passed the instructions to the others. They stood motionless for a while, facing out into the storm, the wind whipping their cloaks. The squall intensified for a moment before settling. More than one of them sagged when they were finished.

"Get those too tired to ride off their mounts and into the wagons," Galiana said to a nearby Dagodin. "Use their horses for a few of those on foot." She rode closer to him. "So far, Ryne's distraction worked."

"Good," Ancel said, trying to sound braver and more confident than he felt. "He's somewhere ahead of us."

"We will pick him up on the way and find out what this detour is that he requires. Until then make sure we have not lost anyone. You too, Mirza. Remind them, no lamps until we are past the foothills."

"Yes, Shin Galiana," they both said and rode off.

With Charra accompanying him, Ancel split off from Mirza to check one side of the refugee lines while his friend rode along the other. Relying on the twin moons whenever they peeked from behind the clouds was a test in patience on a night that was otherwise drab and gray, but Ancel made sure to ask each Dagodin if they lost any from the groups they supervised. To his relief, the answer every time was no.

An abrupt flash of pain seared across his mind. Immediately, he knew it was Ryne. Weariness, hurt, and shivering cold suffused him. A vision bloomed in his head. *Hands freezing, turning blue, a body huddling against icy rocks, then falling down a hill and kicking up snow.* The link cut off.

Ancel whirled, gazing up to the left and the looming, dark countenances of the Red Ridge Mountains. Ryne was up there, and he was hurt. He whipped his reins and raced to Shin Galiana. She glanced up from advising a Dagodin and an Ashishin. The thud of other hooves announced Mirza's arrival.

"You completed your-"

"He's hurt," Ancel wheezed. "He's hurt badly. Probably dying. We need to go to him now."

"Who?" Galiana asked. "Where?"

Frantically, Ancel pointed up the Red Ridge's slopes. "It's Ryne. Up there. I–I can feel him."

Galiana turned to the two Matii. "Continue on this route. You will meet the Dosteri contingent at Colvar's Gap. From there head to Calisto, get supplies, then make your way to Torandil. Kachien, stay and help them." She turned to face Knight Captain Steyn. "See them there safely, Knight Captain."

"What about the Tribunal?" Steyn asked. "Won't they be using the Gap and Calisto?"

"No," Galiana said. "The Dosteri refused them access to either. It was their answer to the Tribunal's lack of help in the negotiations with the Sendethi."

"As you command, Shin Galiana." The Knight Captain wheeled his horse and rode off with the Ashishin following at his heels.

"Come," Galiana said. She cocked her head for a moment when she saw Mirza.

"There's no way you're leaving me behind," Mirza said before she uttered a word.

Ancel opened his mouth to tell his friend to stay with the others. The defiant look on Mirza's face and his earlier sentiments concerning the Ashishin spoke for themselves. Ancel smiled.

They rode east, cutting a swath through fresh snow as high as the horses' knees. Beside them, Charra bounded, unhindered by the drifts. The deep fluff made for slow going, but Ancel would let nothing stop them. At the back of his mind, the lump that spoke of Ryne's location pulled him, the feel of it as tremulous as the day when Ryne stepped out from the woods. Locking onto the location in case he lost the link entirely, he slogged on. The wind whipped and howled about them as if possessed, kicking up powder that made him pull his scarf even tighter and duck his head. Icy flecks caked the cloth around his

mouth, the material carrying the scent of his breath, steam collecting moisture that soon froze. Hands gripping the reins tight through his fox fur gloves, he concentrated on the thought of reaching his mentor in time.

The plains, broken by the occasional tree or slope of land, seemed to go on forever. The towering silhouettes of the Red Ridge Mountains appeared to move farther away. Undaunted, Ancel snapped his reins, ignoring the stallion's snort of protest. He lost track of time, but not of the lump. Soon, they reached the first foothills.

The going became tougher then, the route more treacherous as the snow grew deeper and the slopes icier. As much as he wanted to push his mount, Ancel slowed, choosing their path carefully. It would do little to help Ryne if his horse broke a leg now. Even deep in furs, his bones were still chilled and his feet numb. At times, he couldn't feel his fingers. Ignoring them, he plowed on.

The Red Ridge Mountains rose up before them like massive white monoliths. In warmer weather, red, dusty sand covered these slopes, but now no such color existed. Enveloped by winter's freezing breath, they were expansive precipices and cliffs glowing silvery blue whenever the moons peeked from behind the clouds.

Ancel stopped abruptly, the lump in the back of his mind spiking stronger than before. He glanced around at his surroundings. Something about the area clicked. The visions he witnessed through the link came again. He closed his eyes, taking in the mountains as Ryne tumbled down an embankment. Ancel snapped his eyes open. *That one.* He flapped his reins, heading toward the closest steep rise.

A sudden barking roar from Charra stopped him in his tracks.

There, at the bottom of the hill was Ryne, his Etchings giving off a soft glow.

Ancel couldn't tell if his chest rose and fell. Nor could he make out the telltale mist from his nostrils or mouth. Before anyone uttered a word, he leapt from his saddle and stumbled through the thigh-high snow to Ryne's prone form.

Ryne's eyes fluttered open, and he gave a weak smile. "I overdid it again."

"You aren't wounded?"

"N-no. W-w-worse. C-c-cold. I used too much power. I had to in order to pull the vasumbrals away and make sure everyone escaped. I fractured my aura and one of them touched it, ate into my sela."

Galiana and Mirza rode up alongside them.

Squinting, Galiana said, "We need to get him some place warm."

Ancel barely heard the words as he delved into the Eye to study Ryne's aura. He gasped as he did so. Mater rolled off the man in waves of color. Where an aura normally appeared as a solid shell around a

living being, he discerned rents in Ryne's. From those fissures, essences leaked in a grayish hue that at times grew darker before shining to near silver. Somehow, Ancel knew what they were.

Sela essences.

"I know where we are," Mirza said. "This is one of the routes my father takes when we're heading to the quarries or to Harval for mining supplies." He pointed up the incline. "Not too far up the slope is one of the many caves in this area. We usually keep them stocked with wood and the like. The snows won't be as deep either because of the way the ridges protect each lower one."

"One problem," Galiana said. "How are we going to get him up there if he cannot walk?"

"I–I can manage with Ancel's help," Ryne said, his voice a raspy whisper.

Ancel frowned.

"N-need," Ryne said, his teeth chattering. "S-same as you used a-against the Knight and for the Chainin. Subm-m-it that need t-t-to the essences through your Et-etch-etch-ings. P-pic-picture what you nee-need and the Et-Etchings will grant it." When he finished, Ryne's chest labored as he sucked in great breaths. Steam spilled from his mouth and nostrils.

Ancel closed his eyes and reached to his Etchings. He pictured every intricate detail, each edge, the pictures of the sun's searing flames, the soft glow from the twin moons, the earth below where they touched. What he craved was strength. He delved into the Eye and opened his Matersense. Immediately, the clamoring voices tried to overwhelm him, but he guided them down into the depths of the pool within the Eye and into his sela.

A contented sigh came from the voices. "*What is it you need of us?*" they said in a chorus.

Strength.

"*Take it. It is yours, but remember this is a bargain. You take, we feed.*"

You have all you need before you.

Their answer was a sudden surge of Form essences mingled with a bit of the Streams. He guided them into the Etchings. As soon as he did so, the intricate art along his arms writhed with life. Light filtered in to bond earth and metal together in a way that would put a mastersmith to shame, then that luminance diffused into its more potent form: energy. A heated blast rushed through him, snatching all sense of touch from his chest and arm. Almost involuntarily, his hand snaked out. Ryne's fingers engulfed his arm. With an effortless snap of his wrist and forearm, Ancel swung Ryne around, plowing through snow as if the deep drifts and Ryne's body were weightless. He faced

uphill. A gasp from Mirza and a hiss from Galiana reminded him they were still present.

"Lead on," Ancel said.

Mirza eyed him and Ryne before he nodded and headed up the incline. Behind them, Galiana guided the three horses.

Not sparing a moment to contemplate all he'd done, Ancel dragged Ryne through the snow, the giant a pin weight on his arm. Up ahead, a path cleared before Charra.

Deep in his Matersense, Ancel gaped at the elemental bursts flying from Charra. The snow and ice melted like a hot knife through butter. Where Charra found such heat in the freezing cold was beyond him.

While Charra's clearing did help, it created another problem. The ground was becoming slick with mud. On several occasions, Ancel slipped, and as they worked their way higher, the more treacherous the path became. He wanted to check on Ryne, but he needed all his focus to maintain his footing. Slowly, he also grew colder. Without the ability to bundle himself up, his arms and legs soon went from tingling with cold to outright numbness. If not for his scarf and hood, he may not have been able to feel his ears or his nose. Ice clogged the cloth at his mouth.

Need. The word surged through him. He needed warmth if he was to continue dragging Ryne to safety without the protection of his furs for himself. His wish communicated itself to his Etchings and the drawing of the sun twitched as if it wanted to walk off his skin. Warmth rolled through his body.

Head down, Mirza leveled off as they crested the foothill and reached the Red Ridge Mountains proper. When Ancel gained the same expanse, he spared Ryne a glance. His mentor's eyes were closed, but he did appear to breath evenly.

Ancel let his shoulders relax as he took in their surroundings. The clouds had finally given up their fight with the moons. Silver-blue illuminated the rest of the way, allowing the mountains to throw their shadows out across the land in a vast shroud. Whereas the ground before rose in gradual inclines, here, the walls shot up before them, cliff-like, glittering with thousand-foot long icy teeth. The phenomenon continued up the mountain.

As he was about to voice the opinion that there was no way he could drag Ryne farther up, Mirza pointed and led them alongside the steep slope. The deep shadows had hidden a wide path free of precipitation. A glance up revealed why.

Above them, an overhang protected this shelf of land-the ridges after which the mountains gained their name. They spanned to overhangs, each jutting out farther than the one below it, protecting

each in turn. Out into open space was a set of the icy teeth. He realized then what it was: a frozen waterfall cascading off the ridge above.

The view to the land below was breathtaking. For miles, moonlight illuminated the plains and hills in a mosaic of white, silver, blue tints, and shadow. Whiteness still wreathed the area where Eldanhill should have been. A glow lit the clouds in the town's vicinity.

"In here," Mirza called, his voice echoing. His head popped out from the dark moments later. "We'll be safe for now."

Ancel squinted. The darkness became a wide cave mouth. He let out a long exhale and dragged Ryne's prone form inside. Darkness swallowed him.

Strong odors of wet earth and mustiness filled his nostrils. From a few feet away came a shuffling and Mirza's muttered curses. Running water gurgled nearby. A sudden flash of light filled the interior, and he averted his eyes. As his sight adjusted, he took in his surroundings.

The ground was worn smooth from use. What appeared to be old clothes were piled near the blackened embers of a firepit. A small waterfall cascaded from an outcrop at the back of the cave, the falling water pouring into a stream that ran past them into a small clear pool before continuing into darkness.

Galiana stood near the cave mouth holding a lightstone. "Don't worry, I made sure to hide the entrance with a Forging. No one can see the light."

In one of the corners were several stacks of branches. Mirza was already gathering them.

"You can set him down now." Galiana nodded to Ryne.

Ancel looked down. Ryne was still holding onto his arm. His face carried a slight blue tinge similar to the day they first encountered him. Ryne's eyes were closed but his breathing was steady. Ancel pried his fingers loose. At the same time, he released the Eye and his hold on his Etchings.

The room spun and blackness took him.

Chapter 27

Sometimes the snow fell so heavily it blotted out the surroundings, but as the flakes touched the ground, the blood of the fallen painted it red. Moans of the dying, wails of the mourning, screeches of the bloodthirsty, and the gurgles of death washed through the air upon the howling wind. Mangled armor and torn bodies lay strewn as far as the eye could see as if flung by a massive storm.

There had been a storm, Sakari thought. A storm of death.

His shadeling army boiled black across the land tearing into the Dagodin ranks.

And shattered.

Garbed in armor to match the bloody snow, the Tribunal's soldiers held fast. Their shield wall dropped with the precision of a hundred thousand dancers synchronized to one song. A symphony of steel played. Shadelings died.

Several hundred beasts Blurred up and over the shield wall. Bolts of fire and lightning met them. The concussions from both should have rocked the Dagodin formations below the shadelings, but the Shins had formed a layered barrier to protect them. Dark blood spattered upon its surface. Bodies landed, appearing as if they were suspended in the air above the enemy's ranks.

As for his vasumbrals, the writhing, worm-like monstrosities churned underground before boring up and out. Earth and snow crashed into any nearby soldiers, flinging them from their feet or crushing them. Maws agape the beasts snatched men by threes or fours, their black bodies bulging as they swallowed. Foolhardy Shins attacked them with any manner of Forge, from icy spikes able to skewer a man in half, to searing fire waves or bolts crackling with energy. Unaffected, the vasumbrals wreaked havoc, absorbing as many Forges as they could, growing stronger, maturing.

But not fast enough. Not against this army.

The telltale hiss that imitated a giant sword slicing the wind rose over the din of battle. Those weren't any blades. More portals were opening to allow the Tribunal's Matii in-Dagodin, Shin, High Shin, and Raijin by the thousands.

Mater surged moments later. A swath of light cut through a shadebane, decimating its number by half. The daemons threw up their own shield too late, barely saving a few of their number.

With the Exalted and the Raijin joining the fray, he knew he needed to call a retreat. This wasn't the time or the place to war against them. Not unprepared. Not without the Skadwaz and not with immature vasumbrals. Besides, Ryne and his ward had fled. Of that,

he was sure.

He considered breaching the shield over the town and taking the young man's father and the woman, Irmina. He sensed her presence there and knew the council was still within Eldanhill's confines. Acquiring either would not break the accords as they had both attacked him directly. However, destroying the shield would expose the rest of Eldanhill. *That* would violate the agreement.

So much had transpired as he hoped, as his master decreed, but so much had gone wrong. Ever since Benez, he and Thanarien had searched for years to find the Dorns, all to no avail. Rumors spread like snow from the heavens, each one dissolving when they grew warm. Someone had used his master's own methods against them, spreading lies as if they were the truth, subtly changing fact into myth and myth into fact.

Now, he'd failed by no fault of his own, or at least it would appear that way to Kahkon. The accords had always been a hindrance, but the Eztezians forced it upon the Nine as reassurance before accepting the Etchings. As much as it seemed that he had wanted to fulfill the orders to kill Thanarien, they prevented him and any other netherling from doing so. He could not help his smile. A useless habit he'd picked up from humanity, but he smiled nonetheless. The pact was of no consequence now though, not as far as Thanarien was concerned. His old master had broken that protection himself.

A chance still remained to trap Thanarien and his ward, but he doubted anyone else knew the location of the nearest Entosis. If they did, then Charra would need to lend a hand. He knew he needed to tread carefully now. His job was a precarious undertaking. Hopefully, he'd bought enough time.

After surveying the remnants of the battle once more, he decided it was time to withdraw. He nodded to the ebony, glossy-winged form of the archdaemon, its color tinged with deep blue, and watched as it concentrated, fixing its mind along the link with all its brethren.

As he turned away, Sakari waved a hand and several portals appeared, their blackness blotting out the land behind them. He stepped through. The portals would be left open long enough for the vasumbrals and the daemons. Whatever shadelings made it back through would be a plus. The rest he would abandon to wreak havoc and keep the Tribunal occupied for a while.

He had a homecoming to prepare.

Chapter 28

On one knee, head bowed, Irmina waited for the Exalted. The stillness of the room needled at her, making her want to stand, move around, anything to dispel her apprehension. The marble floor of the Mystera's main audience hall was cold even through her leather armor. Dagodin and Ashishin had escorted Stefan and the other council members to another building. Full-throated screams echoed from that direction, rising above the howling gale outside. She flinched with each painful wail.

When the door opened, five people strode into the room, chilly air and swirls of snow accompanying them. If not for the softness of the three females' features, the difference in sex would have been impossible to tell, especially with their matching, pristine white robes. Colors shimmered from their sleeves as if a living rainbow inhabited them. As she noticed within their room at the Iluminus, the reek of festering flesh wafted from the Exalted. Throat constricting, Irmina swallowed against a sudden lump.

The Exalted's heads were bald and speckled like eggs. But where an egg would be smooth, their skin reminded her of old, pale leather. It was wrinkled and dry, loose in spots, pulling at the edges in some areas, while tight and shiny in others. Not a single pair of eyes among them contained an iris and instead appeared to be radiant, golden pools. The hands exposed by the openings of their long sleeves bore the same splotches as their faces and heads and were just as sickly and emaciated. Irmina always thought of Jerem as old, maybe ancient. When she gazed upon the Exalted, one word came to mind.

Eternal.

"Stand." Their voices were one.

She obeyed.

"What is the meaning of this, Raijin Irmina?" The voice was the disembodied one she remembered from the Iluminus.

Irmina tried to discern who spoke but not a single pair of lips moved.

"You were ordered to kill this Ryne, whoever he was linked with, and the council."

"You did none of this but still saw fit to call on us," said the voice that dripped like water.

"You failed," said musical tones.

"Yet you dared summons usss," hissed steam from liquid poured over hot coals

"Punishment," Thunder rumbled.

The voices rose around her, their doubts repeated, their threats

maintained. They came from so many directions her head spun. If there had been a wall close by, she would have leaned on it to steady herself. Instead, she did the one thing she could think of; she allowed herself to delve into the Eye. Almost instantly, a sense of calm settled over her.

With serenity came clarity. Each voice grew more distinct. She could attach each to a face. Disembodied belonged to the woman on the far right, her nose slightly crooked. Musical tones tinkled from a man with smoother features than the others, his skin a shade darker, a wry smile on his face. Owned by a woman a hand taller than the other two females, dripping water pattered faster and faster before cutting off as Irmina stared directly at her. The hissing voice was a woman who made a habit of interlocking her fingers as she spoke and whose expression showed no emotion. The last man, thunder, had eyes that reminded her of storm clouds. Their voices dwindled to a faint buzz as Irmina looked from one to the other.

Irmina frowned, her brows knitting as she realized something else. Their voices were inside her head, similar to what she herself did when she connected with beasts to tame them. Touching upon her Gift to control almost any creature, she pushed back against the voices, the minds, and expelled them.

Gasps escaped the Exalted's lips, and more than one wore wide-eyed expressions of shock. Within moments though, their features became serene.

Emboldened by their faltering, Irmina folded her arms. "This would go easier if I knew your names." Several sets of hairless eyebrows arched at her statement. "And please stay out of my-"

A hand raised by the man with the stormy eyes cut her off. But the effect wasn't just from his hand. Something constricted against her throat, preventing her from speaking. She snatched at her Matersense and choked back a yell at what she saw.

Mater boiled around the Exalted in thick bands, undulating, overlapping and in so many strands and colors she was unable to separate each or discern the difference in the essences much less the elements. Elongated strands of Mater stretched from the man's hand to her throat. As his fingers tightened so did the tendrils around her neck. A stern look from the disembodied woman, and the pressure eased. The woman cocked her head and stared at her counterpart. He sighed, and the elements retreated.

Heart thumping, blood roaring in her ears, Irmina sucked in a breath. Her fear threatened to skitter within the boundaries of the Eye. By sheer force of will, she inhaled deeply several more times before her hand stopped its shaking, and her heartbeat eased.

"Raijin Irmina," the woman with the disembodied voice said. "I

am Exalted Malinda. It is uncommon. No. I will be frank. What you did has not been done in five hundred years. So please pardon Exalted Buneri." She tilted her head toward the man whose stormy eyes now flashed, his lips curling as he sneered. "This," Malinda continued, pointing to the younger male in their group, "is Exalted Leukisa." She motioned to the taller of the other two women. "Exalted Ordelia and this is-"

"I'm Verturi," hissed the remaining woman, eyes cold and dead.

"Thank you." Irmina bowed. "I meant no disrespect, but when you're in my head, I find it hard to think."

"We understand," Leukisa said.

"But you must still explain," began Ordelia.

"Why the Council is alive," added Malinda.

"As well as Ryne and the one he's linked to," finished Buneri.

Face a blank mask, Verturi merely tilted her head to one side.

"The shadeling army attacked as I was about to strike at Ryne. He went to fight them." Irmina kept her gaze steady and unflinching as she spoke. "Galiana Materialized with Ancel before I could do anything. The remaining Shin did the same for the people who were left."

"Those traitors are not Shin," Buneri said. "Never have been. Never will be."

"Where did she take them?" Malinda asked.

Irmina bowed, making her voice carry the appropriate amount of regret. "I–I don't know, Exalted."

Buneri snorted.

"And the others?" Malinda asked.

Irmina glanced up to meet their eyes. "From what I overheard before they departed, they headed to Cahar and the port there."

"Hmm. How is it then that you managed to take the council?" Ordelia's lips curved into a slight smile.

Irmina sensed she needed to be extra careful around her. She shrugged. "You saw how many of their Matii are dead near the gates. I managed to defeat the ones responsible for the council before they Forged."

"Well, at least she gave us that much," rumbled Buneri with a smirk and slight shake of his head. "But let me guess, Malinda, you will say to allow her to live."

"She managed to get us the boy's father," Malinda said. "Come now, Buneri, you did not expect her to challenge the Eztezian did you?"

"Expectation and orders are two different things." Buneri folded his arms, placing his hands into the sleeves of his robe. "The question is did she try?"

“What you wanted would have been suicide,” Irmina said, “but I would have tried.”

“Sometimes death is preferable to not making an attempt.” Verturi’s expression remained blank, but a certain glint in her eyes told she expected nothing less.

“And if I died,” Irmina allowed her annoyance to drip from her words, “who would tell you that the man who brought those shadelings was himself a netherling? The very same creature, in fact, that once posed as Ryne’s bodyguard?”

Not only did their expressions change, but their thoughts, their voices rose in a thousand whispers like the rustlings of a reedy field on an especially windy day. Concern, disbelief, but above all, fear skittered across those thoughts. Squeezing her eyes tight, Irmina tried to shove them from her mind. They receded to a buzz but did not completely disappear.

Irmina opened her eyes and studied the Exalted. Brows wrinkled, lips pursed, Buneri waved his hand occasionally as he strived to make some point or another. Of them all, his expression said he was the least concerned. For the most part, Malinda simply nodded. Ordelia and Leukisa seemed to agree on whatever they argued. Verturi made periodic objections. Finally, they appeared to reach a common decision, and all gazes turned to her.

“There’s a way for you to redeem yourself, Raijin Irmina. We know where they fled. We shall send you with a contingent of Pathfinders and High Shin to capture them.”

Chapter 29

Eyes burning, shoulders so sore she could barely lift an arm, Galiana monitored her two patients from where she sat on a slab of rock. The campfire crackled and danced like a spirit of flame, throwing shadows across Ancel's and Ryne's features. Periodically, she fed the two men a kinai potion enhanced with sweet fleshberries to help with the mending process. Both their faces appeared serene as if in some pleasant dream state. Their chests rose and fell evenly. At one point, Ryne had taken several sharp, indrawn breaths. Beyond that, both were healing fine.

Pinpricks of dawn inched through the cave's yawning mouth. The interior smelled of horse, smoke, and unwashed bodies coupled with a daggerpaw's musky stench. Over in a corner near a small spring, their mounts stood with their heads down. Charra sat next to Ancel, golden eyes aglow even more so with the fire. Poking a branch into the flames, Mirza studied his friend. Whenever he glanced her way, he scowled. She shook her head.

"I would not do anything to harm them," she said. "I understand your dislike for us, for any Ashishin, but I raised you, young man. You have known me long enough to realize I am nothing like those who took your mother. Keep this up and I will set you on my leg and paddle your ass like the child you're acting."

Mirza's expression became defiant. His eyes were beads.

"If you hate us so much, why choose to become a Dagodin?" She needed to find some way through his stubbornness. He was as mule-headed as his father, Devan.

"What choice did I have with what we face?"

She nodded. "True, but I sense there's more to your decision." Despite her proximity to the campfire, the thoughts of what she witnessed the night before sent chills through her body. Shadelings, daemons, vasumbrals, and netherlings. Knowing there would be worse to come did not help. All the while the world was mired in petty squabbles. She hoped Jerem was faring better than her with their other plans. Huddling into her cloak, she resisted the urge to shiver.

"When the Pathfinders came I didn't know why they were there or who they were." Mirza tossed little bits of wood into the fire. "I got all excited about the hounds they had with them. I thought they were Dagodin like Father used to be. I couldn't understand why Father seemed so afraid." He shook his head. "After Father told me the Pathfinders took Mother, I promised myself that I'd never let your kind hurt someone else close to me. For that, I needed to grow stronger."

She understood. The idea brought a smile to her face. “At the same time, you intended to discover any weakness an Ashishin might possess. After all, since you Dagodin cannot Forge, how would you hope to defeat such as I?”

Mirza’s eyes narrowed and the stick stopped moving.

“You have every reason to be upset when it comes to the Tribunal’s actions, but your mother left the Pathfinders no choice,” she added.

The stick broke.

“You hate hearing it, but that does not change the truth. I have taught you long enough for you to understand what happened with her.”

“How do I know any of your teachings weren’t another set of lies?” Mirza’s voice was low in his throat.

“Have I lied to you before?”

“Have you? I’m not as stupid as some think. I know how the Tribunal twists reports to their benefit, even going so far as to use the Devout to spread the ‘truths’ they want told. I have seen some of my mother’s old books. They are different to the versions we were given in some classes.”

Galiana pursed her lips. Mirza liked to read, but he always appeared slower than most in class. She smiled inwardly. To keep so much to himself and yet play the role he did was a noteworthy accomplishment. Wisdom in the disguise of foolishness. The boy she’d known had changed much since Randane and even more so since Stefan gave him *the Disciplines*. “To answer you, no, nothing I taught was a lie. I can tell you this: Pray you never feel the suffering a Matus who can Forge experiences when they go mad.”

Mirza glanced over to Ancel, his expression softening. “Will he …”

“If he uses his power with the necessary caution, he can hold it off for a long time, maybe as long as I have. Living as we do is a nightmare, but we do what we must.”

“There has to be a way to stop it altogether.” Mirza looked up to her pleadingly.

She shook her head. “For us, there is no if, only when.” She refused to coddle him. When any Forger succumbed to the madness, the elements became more volatile. The destruction left in their wake tore at the fabric of the world itself.

The Pathfinders existed to lessen such occurrences. Disciplined unlike any others, they consisted of the minority who made no mistakes when wielding the essences. They survived longer and proved to be stronger than almost any other Forgers. In combat, few could stand before them. When dispatched, they took no prisoners.

“You’re worried about them too, aren’t you?” Mirza asked as if he read her thoughts.

She hesitated a moment before answering. Finally, she sighed. “Yes. They were at Eldanhill tonight. How many? I do not know. But if they have our trail it will only be a matter of time before they catch us.”

“What if we fled to Ostania?”

“Not a bad idea.” She hadn’t intended to reveal that was indeed her plan, at least not yet. “The problem is getting there before they can stop us. When deep in Doster, we will be fine for a while, but to cross into Ostania, we must take a ship from Damal’s Landing which means going through Ishtar. Even then, unless some captain wants to brave the Glowing Sea, we’ll land in Felan Mark.”

“We’ll be travelling through Tribunal territory almost the entire time,” Mirza blurted.

“Yes. Land with wards and Bastions able to pick out any strong Matii. Unless we find another way, they will catch us before we cross the Vallum of Light.” She and Jerem had come up with one way to make sure a portion of their people made it out of Felan. However, that plan involved Quintess and the Iluminus. The longer she was stuck here, the harder it would be to accomplish.

“Why don’t you Materialize us there? Can’t you manage now that it’s only us?”

“Materialization is not that simple.”

“It isn’t?” He shrugged. “You open a portal between one point and another, step through, and poof, you’re there. Sounds simple enough to me.”

Galiana smirked. “First, Forging takes a great deal of energy and mental strain. The risk of succumbing to the elements then is higher than at any other time. One of the main reasons why we teach Ashishin to restrict themselves. It’s even more so with Materialization. But even if the Matus could deal with the strain and had enough power, he or she couldn’t Materialize beyond the Vallum. It was built to prevent such a breach.”

“So,” Mirza pursed his lips while rubbing at the stubble under his chin, “an Ashishin could Materialize within or outside the Vallum but not cross it. Well, just take us to the Vallum’s entrance then.”

“And appear at the camp of the largest army the Tribunal possesses? Smart. Not to mention that it’s too great a distance.”

“Wait …,” the young man’s brow furrowed, “if what you say is true then whoever took Ancel’s mother must be on this side of the Vallum.”

“Either that or they made short trips until they reached Vallum’s edge then crossed.” She’d considered the same possibility as Mirza

suggested when she tried to understand why the Heralds had failed to sense any powerful Forges or the shadelings.

"Fine, then take us to Calisto or even Torandil?"

She sympathized with his desperation to act. "Too risky." Galiana shook her head. "The moment I Materialize, the Tribunal's Pathfinders would know. Like I said, Granadia is littered with wards against such releases of Mater. Any powerful Forging will draw them to us."

"You know, for all your power, you Ashishin are beginning to sound pretty fucking useless."

Galiana never felt the Forge that knocked him on his ass.

"You should learn some *fucking* respect."

She snapped her head around at Ryne's voice. Leaning on one elbow, he had dark rings under his eyes, and his cheeks were so indrawn, his jaw-line stood out. Charra perked up momentarily before settling back down.

Mirza scrambled away, glaring at them both, but fear evident in his expression. After a moment, he muttered an apology.

"We need to leave right away."

"Why?" Galiana shifted to get a better look at Ryne. His skin still had a faint pallor. "Ancel still needs more time."

"In order to escape the Tribunal's Pathfinders, I Materialized here."

"You did what?"

"That isn't the worst of it. The Exalted were with them."

Galiana stood abruptly and began to pace, trying her best to fight down the urge to gather Ancel, put him on his mount and flee. After a moment, she stopped. "There is no way we can outrun them. Our only chance lies in making it to Harval."

"First I must regain some strength." Ryne climbed to his feet. "So does he." He gestured to Ancel. The young man hadn't moved. "The only place we can do so lies deeper into the Red Ridge."

Galiana frowned. *To what was the man referring?*

"How do we get there if he can't move?" Mirza asked.

"I'll carry Ancel. It will be faster than tying him to his horse. The sooner we leave the better."

"What of our trail?" Mirza stood. He bent to gather one of their saddles.

"Trying to hide it will not make a difference," Galiana said. "They will have trackers with them. Ryne, are you sure this detour cannot wait?"

"It can't, not if you want either of us to be of any use when the Pathfinders do catch up. Besides, where we're headed should confuse their trackers for a time. What's so special about this town, Harval, anyway?"

“The one chance to put enough space between us and the Pathfinders … a Travelshaft.”

Openmouthed, Ryne stared at her. “Those have been sealed for centuries. You would brave the mind-twisting of a zyphyl for a chance to escape?”

Galiana could not help the inkling of fear that passed through her at the mention of the gigantic, silver, worm-like beasts created to protect the entrances to the Travelshafts. Even asleep, they warped one’s perception of reality. Surviving the zyphyl was a test all on its own. “At this point, I will do anything to save Ancel.” Her heart ached. “With his father in the hands of the Exalted, he’s our only chance of keeping our people together.”

Ryne eyed Ancel then nodded. “There might be a way to give us more time if you can manage it.”

Galiana frowned.

“You said they will have trackers. Give them a different path to follow.”

“How do we-” She cut off as the answer dawned on her. “A construct.”

Ryne smiled. “Exactly. Give it my scent and send it in the opposite direction. Such a Forging won’t take much.” He pointed to the walls around them. “Not with all this material to work with. When you’re done, I’ll feed a bit of me into it.”

Galiana almost asked if what he suggested was possible: wrapping one’s own essence into another person’s Forging. But then, the man was an Eztezian. He should know.

Through the Eye, she opened her Matersense. The essences flooded her vision with their usual brilliance. Around Ryne, they shone even brighter. They flitted, roiled, and spun in half a hundred different patterns touching both his armor and flesh. Some disappeared when they did.

Ignoring most of them was disturbing all on its own, but she managed. As a mender, the essences that made up Ryne’s appearance grew clearer with each passing moment. With a subtle touch to keep her Forging hidden, she kneaded the earth and metals within the Forms of the rocky ground near her feet to match the man.

The ground trembled and shifted. A form rose slowly from the surface of a similar height and build to Ryne. For this, she didn’t need intricate details, which saved her from using too much power. She gave the shape the barest necessities for it to appear as Ryne from a distance.

As she made the construct, she noticed the strands of Mater easing out from Ryne to touch her creation. They writhed around it and eventually sunk inside. When they did so, a breathtaking change

took place. Layers of earth peeled away from her construct and in its place stood an uncanny likeness of the man, down to much of his essences. She gasped.

"Send it where you will," Ryne said in a strained voice.

Galiana pictured the mountains farther to the north and sent the image to the construct. The creature took a few lumbering steps before walking became natural. It disappeared out the cave's mouth and into the dim morning.

Chapter 30

Each of Ryne's steps became practiced agony, but he gritted his teeth against the pain. His breaths left his lips in wheezing gasps. Legs and arms on fire despite the freezing temperature, he carried Ancel on his back. He found himself hunched over to accommodate Ancel's unexpected weight. *What in Ilumni's name did the boy eat?* He didn't look close to being as heavy as he felt. Careful to stay away from icy patches, Ryne strode forward, telling himself he only imagined the cold, the aches, and the soreness.

For a while, he thought the increased weight was simply a reflection of how worn out his own body had become. Until he realized the truth. His body was not healing. Both his energy and life were leaking away in small increments from the vasumbral's touch. One side of his aura was a torn mass. Anguish accompanied each movement as his sela eased out through the rents despite him trying to force it into place by sheer will.

One chance for his survival existed. If they could reach it before he collapsed completely and another snowstorm buried them. He fought against the thought, concentrating on each step instead. If he failed this, Ancel would most likely die also. That was not an option. Determination not to lose his ward lent him strength. He surged forward.

Charra loped in front, often tossing its head as if trying to dislodge something from its shoulders. Snow and ice flew as the netherling manipulated the elements to clear a path. With his Matersense, Ryne determined what Charra did was not a Forging. It appeared as if the beast and the elements were one-they, an extension of the netherling-and Charra had some ability to shift them as if they were physical entities. The action reminded Ryne of watching a puppy at play.

A serrated blade of staggered cliff-faces made up the ridges on either side of them. Pockmarked with overhanging rock, crags, and precipices along the canyon walls they spread before disappearing in the light flurries that fell. Under most overhangs were deep hollows leading to caves similar to the one they left several hours ago. The phenomenon occurred every few hundred feet up the sheer, ice-coated walls. At the peak was a massive plateau, its edge jutting over the cliffs and offering protection to the gully through which they traveled. The occasional snow cornice broke off, tumbled into the passage, and left a dull rumble to accompany the mournful wind.

"The caves are from all the quarrying," Mirza said from a few paces behind him. "The cliffs have been our livelihood for years."

A rainbow of color reflected from the ice and the diamond glint of embedded minerals and metals. The sun shone at an angle well shy of noon, giving warmth to Ryne's weary bones. He was unaccustomed to experiencing the cold, and he could no longer feel his toes. "Were you both miners?" he asked to keep his mind occupied.

"By the gods, no." Mirza chuckled. "Ancel was too busy chasing the girls, and well, I had this habit of disobeying my father who happens to be the foreman at the mines. He wanted me to have no part of his old life as a Dagodin, but," he touched his chest, "this uniform called to me. Everything about being a Dagodin fascinated me. Let's just say my father wasn't pleased." He paused for a few moments, a faraway expression crossing his features. "And now they have him too." Regret seeped from his tone.

Ryne could only imagine what Mirza was experiencing. To know the Exalted now held your last surviving parent after their followers had taken your mother must be tearing at Mirza's insides. Ryne allowed silence to grow between them.

A quick look over his shoulder showed that Galiana still followed, keeping an eye on their rear. The passage continued ahead, the footing treacherous, but not as bad as it would be without the series of ridges protecting the lower areas from the worst of the weather. Although the wind crooned a doleful dirge, it did little more than ruffle his cloak. Snow and ice showered the passage behind as another cornice fell. The customary rumble chased it.

As the noise droned to a halt, another reached Ryne. It reminded him of a donkey's bray, but then he realized the sound was a cracked howl. There was something familiar about it, but he couldn't quite focus. He paused, frowning. "Wolves?" He should have been able to tell what they were, but too much had become skewed.

"There aren't wolves in this part of the Red Ridge, not that I know of at least." Mirza's hand eased down to his bow as he scanned the ridges.

The howl came again, but this time another followed. And another.

"Rockhounds." Mirza said, voice a breathy whisper. "I–It's the trackers." Eyes wild, he stopped and stared back the way they came. "I'll never forget that sound. It's the same as when they came for my mother. Those are Pathfinder hounds. They're usually more of them, but they must have split to cover several directions."

With Mirza mentioning the animals, Ryne recalled the familiarity he had with their howls. The six-legged creatures were descendants of similar beasts created from the Forms during the height of the wars between the Eztezians and the gods. Coveted for their ability to traverse the worst terrain, many a hunter or herder reared them.

However, unlike their namesakes, they lacked hanging jowls, their features more like the wide-muzzled lapras that inhabited the wilds of Ostania.

Behind them, Galiana had stopped to peer up the gully.

"Can we outrun them?" Ryne hefted Ancel higher onto his back.

"No." Mirza tilted his head; his face strained with concentration. "They don't seem to quite have our scent yet, but once they do, we'll have a mile, maybe two at best before they catch us."

Galiana kicked her spurs and her horse trotted over to where they stood. Worry creased her forehead. "Go."

Ryne turned and began loping up the path Charra had made. Behind came another bray from the rockhounds.

"How far is this place of yours?" Galiana called.

"After this gully, maybe another four miles."

"Too far. Our pursuers are close enough now that they will pick up our scents at any moment."

"There must be something one of you can do," Mirza said.

"Anything I try will destroy any chance we have. If you are what you say you are, Ryne. Now would be the time to act."

Ryne gave a slow shake of his head, while trying to ignore his burning limbs. "Despite what you have read, there are limits to our power. And I have just about reached mine. I refuse to attempt anything that will jeopardize Ancel's life any further."

"If they catch us, it will not matter," Galiana said.

Ryne pushed harder, willing himself to place one foot after another. He would see Ancel through this no matter what. If he was forced to fight, then he would make sure no one survived that could stop Ancel from reaching the Entosis. If it came to that, he would tell Charra where to take Ancel.

A low whine made him glance up the path. Charra sat watching them. A feathery touch brushed Ryne's mind. He shivered. It was too familiar, echoing the link he once had with Sakari. No words were spoken but he immediately knew it originated from Charra. The creature gave off an impression, more like a picture of what it intended.

"The daggerpaw will give us the time we need," Ryne said over his shoulder.

"Look," Mirza said, "I know he's big even for a daggerpaw, and he's smarter than most, but what can Charra possibly do that you two can't?"

"Whatever it is, let's hope it's good." Ryne continued on, passing Charra where the daggerpaw crouched with its gaze riveted on the gully behind them.

When the hounds brayed once more, this time closer, and with

more urgency, Ryne stopped. He eased Ancel from his back onto a snowy mound. When he rose, he drew his greatword.

Eyes fearful, Mirza drew abreast of him. Ryne couldn't help his smile as the young man drew a bow and nocked an arrow.

"They have the scent now." Next to him, Galiana peered up toward the cliff faces and the plateaus above. She turned to Charra. "Whatever you plan to do, now is the time."

Without his Matersense, Ryne didn't see what Charra did. There was a brief sensation of pressure on his mind. A surge of energy and increased awareness ebbed through him. The air throbbed, followed by the slicing sound of a portal opening. Then Charra was gone. Before Ryne could locate the beast, a barking roar echoed from beyond the gully. Ryne understood.

"Run, run now," the bark said. "Run."

Pulling on the renewed vigor he was certain Charra had lent him, Ryne sheathed his sword and hoisted Ancel.

They fled.

Chapter 31

Irmina tensed as the search party surged through the snow and away from the small cave set in the cliff behind them. Fear and worry tied her stomach in knots. She had stopped feeling the link to Ancel not long after he left Eldanhill. Her mind conjured the worst possible scenarios from its absence.

"On the other side of that ridge," a tracker yelled above the rockhounds' baying.

Similar to the one she controlled in the Mondros Forest, these had a stony carapace, but were not as large, maybe the size of a wolf. The six-legged creatures paced back and forth at the plateau's edge.

Ahead of her, several High Ashishin in woolen trousers and fur-lined jackets picked their way toward the edge of the ridge. Half a dozen Pathfinders in their customary silver armor, faces enclosed in full helms, followed them. The trackers were pointing below as she caught up.

The tiny forms of three people, two on horseback, were fleeing through a gully several thousand feet below them. Somehow unimpeded by snow, they made good time. The largest of them was carrying another person on his back. Sunlight glinted from swaths of color on the big man's arms. Irmina's breath caught in her throat. At once she knew that was Ryne and Ancel. She attempted to find the link but came away with nothing.

One of the High Ashishin snarled. Three others raised their hands.

Essences of cold coalesced as they sapped them from the ice, snow, and the chill in the air itself. A crackling sound ensued; a semi-transparent bridge formed. It elongated out over the precipice and down.

A roar reverberated, rebounding off the surrounding cliffs. The bridge shattered.

Icy shards careened through the air. Quick as thought, the Pathfinders erected a shield of solid air. When the projectiles struck its translucent surface, they broke into pieces. The Matii scrambled away from the precipice.

"They dare to attack us?" High Jin Quintess blurted, round-eyed, auburn hair spilling about her face. "Finders, use-"

A gust of howling wind cut her off. It abruptly grew to gale-like proportions, snowflakes pelting them, tiny icicles pinging off armor, and thudding into Irmina's clothing. If not for her layered wools and furs, Irmina was sure the wind and icy barrage would have sliced to the bone. Squinting, she pulled her scarf up to cover her mouth and bowed her head. The snowflakes became pebbles.

However, she knew they shouldn't be exposed to the hail of ice. The way the ridges and plateaus formed, with this one being maybe a few hundred feet from the one directly opposite, and the method in which the outcrop of the ridges above extended over each other, they should have been sheltered from such weather. The storm had found a way to funnel itself down into the passage.

Before she could dwell on the idea, the hail grew bigger, some almost the size of a fist. Now, they didn't simply thud against her clothes. They hurt. One struck her in the head. She cried out. Bright lights danced before her eyes. A moment later, she felt something wet under her fur-lined cap. Warmth trickled down her brow followed by the sharp scent of blood.

She thought she heard yelling above the gale, but when she glanced up she couldn't see but a foot or two in front of her face. Ice crusted her eyebrows and lids. Instinctively, she retreated to the cliff face rather than attempt to move forward against the swirling eddies buffeting her. Her breaths grew raspy as the temperature plunged.

Head throbbing, she remembered the caves. With her back to the icy wall, the torrent of the storm was less. She edged sideways, a hand feeling along the cliff to where the opening should be. When she met empty air, she grasped the edge and pulled. The cave mouth and the warmth within yawned blessedly before her. Breaths coming in ragged gasps, she stumbled inside.

Irmina blinked several times for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. A rustle of movement sounded in a corner, and then a light bloomed. The luminance resolved into a small fire. Around it was what remained of their party.

There was High Jin Quintess, lying on her back, eyes closed; High Shin Hardan, his eyes reflecting the flames, silver hair soggy as he worked a mending on Quintess; High Shin Cantor with his broad back against a wall, nursing a gash to his head, blood running down his dark-skinned pockmarked face. Of their counterpart, Neftana, there was no sign. Only four of the six Pathfinders remained. Not a single tracker or rockhound was among those inside.

A sound drifted over the howling wind outside. Several more joined it. Although her head throbbed, Irmina frowned. It was a bark ending in a roar or piercing growl.

She reached her senses out and recoiled as her mind touched another consciousness. It was like slamming her fist into a brick wall. She gasped.

"What is it," High Shin Cantor asked, his voice a dull rumble steeped in pain.

"Daggerpaws," Irmina replied. "Hundreds of them."

Chapter 32

Ancel drew the sword. The Etchings running down the blade glowed. As they did so, the essences rushed into its surface and bonded. In a burst of luminance, the weapon transformed, its width increasing to massive proportions made up entirely of completed elements. The Etchings spelled out a single word.

Antonjur.

He pointed the sword skyward, to the heavens above Jenoah.

Elemental power roiled across the sky as if the gods of Streams and Flows battled for supremacy. No, not as if. They *did* indeed battle. He felt them. The threads of their power, of their essences, flowed and congealed all around him. He imagined their fear-inspiring visages clad in the finest armors, only their sparkling eyes showing through slits in their helms.

Ilumni and Amuni wielded the elements of Streams. The essences of light and shade within each comingled. The god of light's power resonated in the lightning flashes and in the wan afternoon sun. Amuni's taint bubbled everywhere, from the foliage below, infected and decaying with his shade, to the darkness choking the air. Even the sun appeared diminished here in Hydae.

Opposite those two, Ancel sensed the twin goddess and god of Flows lashing out together. Their power sent prickles across his skin as if he stood naked instead of in his silversteel armor filigreed with Etchings. Aeoli commanded the void, using the air itself to form the storm winds. Hyzenki paired with his sister in the fight, breaking the thunderheads to make water join the fray. Black rain pelted down before howling winds whipped the drops sideways like arrows shot from a million bows.

However, the attacks were not aimed at each other. The blasts soared through the sky, across the lands and seas, headed toward Ancel and the hundreds of thousands of people in Jenoah. A single word echoed in Ancel's mind.

Protect.

Energy coruscated from his sword. It formed a dome many miles wide and high, encompassing the entire city. From his Etchings came a Matersurge. It joined that in the air. The primal essences were his to command. A towering figure wreathed in light formed.

The attack of the four gods struck. The world went white. He screamed.

Mouth open in a soundless shriek, Ancel jerked upright. Sweat poured down his face. His heart felt as if it would burst from his chest. "Mother, Da …" his voice trailed off as the greenery around him

caught his eye. *A dream*. He gulped in air, let out a slow breath, and then frowned. *Green? And why was it so warm?* The last he remembered was dragging Ryne-. He froze, his heart thundering once more. *Where am I?*

Dotted by occasional blooms, verdant plains of grass spread down from the slope where he sat. Beyond them was a lake, its waters glinting with the sunlight, and a forest with so many different shades of color it appeared as if someone draped a rainbow atop the trees. The aroma of fruits and flowers was so overwhelming he could taste them. The expansive forest continued to where a mountain sprouted in the distance, a titan of earth and stone wearing a green cloak, its shoulders and peaks disappearing in mists and clouds. He scrubbed at his eyes and licked his lips, but neither the sights nor the tastes wavered.

Although he couldn't see them, he felt the pull of essences as if they wanted to snatch the skin from his body. It brought memories of the night the man in black took his mother. He slid his hand to where the link said his sword should be next to him and closed his fingers around the hilt.

"You're awake, finally."

Ancel almost leapt out of his skin. He snapped his head around. Behind him, Ryne stood with a hand on his hip. Eyes narrowed, the giant man, stared at him.

After swallowing a few deep breaths that he hoped Ryne didn't notice, Ancel found words. "What happened?" He somehow felt more refreshed than he had in a long time.

"You Forged too much Mater in your efforts to help me. You not only depleted your sela, but you damaged your aura." Ryne still squinted.

Ancel remembered what he saw leaking from Ryne and the cracks in the man's aura. He nodded.

"It's why I needed to get here and brought you." The tightness in Ryne's eyes eased. "There are several outcomes to a broken aura. Madness can be a result. Death is inevitable if the damage isn't completely sealed. This," Ryne gestured around them, "is one of the few places where such a mending can take place. It's also one the few places where an Eztezian can empower their Etchings."

Ancel took in the rest of their surroundings. Sparkling with minerals, canyon walls rose behind them, stretching up so high they appeared endless. A waterfall splashed down a sheer cliff face that was black and green from the water flow and the vegetation thriving there. It crashed into an emerald pool below. From there, the water flowed off into a twisting yet short river pouring into the center of the valley to form the enormous lake.

Whistles and singing calls played a medley of life, each refrain higher than the next. Multicolored birds flew in a dozen or more flocks toward fruit trees along the plains. Small herds grazed on the grassy slopes. Among them he spotted sheep and goats. Slotopes rolled along the ground in their shells, then uncoiled to reveal six legs, four they used to stand on while reaching up, tongues snaking out to snag leaves. There were also slainen, with their leathery hide, long necks, and backs lined with several small humps, as well as other creatures he'd never seen before.

One in particular caught his eye. They were horse-like in appearance but with a longer, more tapered face. They stood maybe two hands taller than any horse. They ranged in color from an almost pure white to a light shade of gold. On their heads, about where horses normally had forelocks, stood what could have passed for horns, except they were blue in color and moved on their own. Not the flutter of hair from a breeze, but the purposeful twitch of life when the creatures flicked their heads or bent to graze. The appendages grew one above the other with the higher one twice as long as the lower. On some of the animals, their golden manes stretched down their backs meeting their tails before stretching out behind them. Those particular ones strutted majestically most of the time and made trumpeting calls.

"What are those?" Ancel pointed at the beasts.

"Kentens. The fastest animal alive if you can somehow manage to tame one. They can use Mater to port from one location to the next, similar to Materializing."

A large herd of deer pranced and played along the edge of the big lake, while other animals settled closer to the small pools dotting the landscape like glittering jewels. Several deer began drinking from the water when the lake abruptly roiled. Two long, scaled necks shot up from what had been a shadow on the water. The deer bounded away, but some were too slow. Large jaws with many rows of teeth and an eye on either side snapped down on two of the animals. The creature recoiled, the murky waters swallowing it and its prey.

Ancel gaped.

"This place is a circle of life and harmony much as Mater itself is the same," Ryne said.

"What is it called?" Ancel asked absently, his attention still on the lake.

"An Entosis. It exists between the Planes of Existence, but is outside the influence of our time. That's why the weather is different here than where we left, but it's still a part of our world, of all the worlds."

Ancel scrunched up his face. "But aren't the Planes sealed by the

Kassite? Isn't that why creatures cannot cross into ours from the Nether, or Hydae, or any one of the other worlds?"

"Yes. They are sealed, but as I understand, if you travel deep enough into an Entosis you will encounter the Kassite itself. It can be crossed there if you're strong enough in Mater. Some say you would need power comparable to a god."

For a moment, Ancel searched his memory for any familiarity but drew a blank. "How come no one has ever mentioned this … Entosis … in any books I've read?"

"Not everything in the world can be found in a book. Only Matii of considerable power can sense, much less enter, an Entosis. I'm uncertain if even High Ashishin are strong enough."

That would mean … For the first time, Ancel noted the absence of Galiana, Mirza, and Charra. Their horses grazed nearby.

"They're here," Ryne said to his unspoken question. "Well, all but Charra. They're off gathering kinai."

"But you said-"

"A powerful enough Matii can bring a few into an Entosis with him. Five are the most that can accompany me."

"If that's so why isn't Charra here?"

Ryne took a breath. "We were being chased by Pathfinders. Charra decided to be a diversion."

"What?"

"Don't be too concerned," Ryne said reassuringly. "Judging from what he is, I doubt they're strong enough to overwhelm him. At the very least, they can't stop him from escaping."

The certainty in Ryne's voice eased the tightness in Ancel's shoulders.

"And in case you're curious, he has more than enough power to enter an Entosis on his own. In fact, go ahead, open your senses, and take a look around you."

Ancel did as requested. Essences spilled around him in pools, waves, and bands, thicker, richer, and more complex than anything he'd witnessed before. Some of it had the viscous consistency of blood. They spooled and dived, congealed, intertwined, and whipped about in a display of dizzying colors. It was like what he'd witnessed when he unleashed the power to summon the netherling but multiplied tenfold. He recognized many essences, but others he couldn't begin to fathom. He gasped when swaths of shade swept by him before flying off to join the others. The movements of the essences were more akin to living creatures, frolicking and cavorting along the light breeze.

What he noticed next were the voices. He could discern those he normally heard, but they were muted in comparison to the constant susurrus of the essences here. They made no demands of him. Exactly

what they said, he could not tell.

"Amazing isn't it?"

Speechless, Ancel nodded.

"These are the primordial essences from which the ones that inhabit our world are formed. The ones you don't recognize are completed elements. It will be some time before you can manage to Forge those, if ever."

"What are they called?"

"Prima Materium."

"How is it the shade is so prevalent among them?"

"Shade is a part of most things, Ancel, as is light. Because men use shade for wickedness doesn't make it evil. It's the intentions of those who wield it that dictate such a distinction. I know," Ryne continued as Ancel arched a speculative eyebrow, "some would say that's blasphemy, but it makes it no less true. Remember when I mentioned the relation between essences and emotions?"

Ancel nodded.

"Apply those same concepts to the gods. It's the touch of the gods that give each essence its individual aspects. Ilumni's benevolence exists in the light. Amuni's malevolence in the shade. Bragni would be heat, passion, anger. Rituni is cold, empty, indifference and so on. We Eztezians believed that at one time the essences simply were.

"Imagine an ocean unaffected by weather or current. We think that the elements themselves were perfectly balanced and intermingled, but the presence of the gods changed all that. Yet, somehow, because the gods were opposites, they complemented each other and still provided the necessary balance and harmony. Now, man's influence is repeating a similar process in Denestia, but with dire effects. Those are part of the differences with the essences here and outside. Think of the ones on the outside as being tainted."

Essences drifted down, coiling around Ancel. They caressed him as they mingled with his aura. His aura. He gasped. For the first time, he was seeing it while calm. He held up his arm. In a nebulous, soft glow, it sat an inch off his skin. He tried to touch his aura, but his hand passed through. The essences seeped into it, and he could tell where it grew stronger as the luminance increased. As they drifted up his arm, they twined into his Etchings. He became aware of each stroke, each line, as if an artist carved the drawings into his skin at that moment. Wide-eyed, he glanced up at Ryne. The giant man was smiling.

"This is the secret of the Etchings. As far as I know, they're the only way to harness Prima Materium inside an Entosis and carry it outside. You can then call on Prima's essences at will. To a lesser extent, the Etchings will filter the tainted counterparts outside in the

world, but eventually you will need to return here to replenish."

As more and more Prima entered his Etchings, a sense of incredible power seeped into Ancel. It was like being at sea, thrust under wave after wave, barely able to gasp for air between each one. He felt as if he could accomplish anything. His back arched, and for a moment, he couldn't think as the power suffused him. When the effect subsided, he heard Ryne continue.

"What you feel now is a mere pittance compared to what you will possess as you gain more Etchings. That is why you must master the one you already possess. And to master them requires that you know the Tenets."

"The Tenets?" Ancel was still trying to piece together all Ryne had just revealed. To think more existed was daunting. Had he missed this much in neglecting his classes at the Mystera?

"They are a set of rules, if you will, that govern the essences. They are interpreted differently by many. For us, they're a connection to the Prima essences residing within your Etchings. With the Tenets, you can summon their full power.

"When the gods initially created us, our jobs were to defend Denestia first, help those who couldn't help themselves, and to build the world into something greater. When the netherlings added the Etchings, they gave us more. The power to destroy, to judge those we found to have broken the balance in the world, including the gods themselves." Ryne paused.

"You sound like a greater version of the Pathfinders."

"In ways but we're much more."

When he'd read the histories of the Eztezians during classes, Ancel often asked why they did the things they had. How was it that Mater could have overwhelmed such powerful men and women? But now, he understood. The entire world looking up to you, expecting you to save them from every disaster, every plague, every war, from famine and starvation, worshipping you almost as if you were a god. All the while, the Eztezians knew the eventual effects wielding Mater would have. Such responsibility placed on the shoulders of a finite group of people. No wonder they folded under such a burden.

"By your expression, I can see you understand our plight. It's yours now, too."

The words came as a shock to Ancel. He'd never thought of it that way. This entire time, he'd considered himself as someone with a talent, yes, but not as an Eztezian. *Well, wasn't that what you were being trained for? To become one of them? How do I handle all this?* He could barely manage his emotions concerning Irmina, much less the near overwhelming situation with his mother and his father.

Immediately, his concern for them threatened to drown him.

Where was Irmina now? Was she somewhere being punished by the Tribunal? And Kachien? Had she managed to lead the other Eldanhill refugees away safely? What of Mother … and Da … He nolonger sensed his mother within the pendant. He licked his suddenly dry lips. "I–I don't know if I'm ready for this."

"No one is ever ready. If I had my way, you would stay here until you had a full grasp of your Etchings and control over your emotions, but time is something we don't have. For now, I'll recite the Tenets that correlate with the strongest of my Etchings since one of yours matches mine. Then, I'll teach you the next one you are strongest in."

"What determines their strength?"

"Two things. One, similar to us, netherlings are generally more adept in one essence or another. They can use others, but as with humans, there is one essence to which they have an affinity. That determines the type of Etching they imbue into an Eztezian."

"And the second thing?"

"I was getting to that," Ryne said with a smile. "Number two is your own lineage. Although there has been much intermingling of races, a bloodline from the original Matii can often be traced in his or her strongest essence."

Ancel frowned, thinking. "Mine is light right, like any Ashishin."

"No," Ryne said. "And that's another thing. Over the years, the title Ashishin has become commonly applied to any Matus who can Forge. That wasn't always so. There were actually twelve different types of Matii, each representing an essence and the gods associated with them."

"Twelve?" Ancel pursed his lips, and then he began to count off on his fingers as he spoke. "Ilumni, Amuni, Bragni and Rituni, the gods of Streams. Humelen, Liganen and Kinzanen, the god and goddesses of Forms. Hyzenki and Aeoli, the god and goddess of Flows. I guess I would need to add Annendin, the One God, but he's supposed to represent all the elements in one isn't he?" He frowned as Ryne nodded. "Are the others two minor gods?"

"No," Ryne said. "The god's name is Entopi, he represents life and death."

"Sela," Ancel added.

"Yes. The Entoses were named after him."

"Do you know what happened to all the other Matii?"

"No, I don't, but stories predating even myself say that some left to populate other worlds in the Omniverse, setting themselves up as gods. But that's a lesson for another day. Of the gods, there's a race of Matii derived from each. Here in Granadia, where the Ashishin have ruled for so long, you tend to see mostly their affinity for light within the people. There are signs of others to a lesser extent, as a result of

the original Tribunal's founders and of course from those who emigrated from foreign lands."

"Like us, the Setian," Ancel added.

"Exactly."

"So who are the ancestral Matii of the Setian?"

"The Alzari, among the strongest Matii, able to wield the Forms and the Streams."

Ancel gasped. Ever since the day when Jillian referred to Kachien as Alzari, he'd wondered about the name. He'd been tempted to search the library, but he asked Kachien instead. She'd reminded him of their conversation on that day outside Randane. He recalled her words vividly.

'We are mercenaries. From the day we can walk until the day we die, we are trained to kill.'

But that wasn't the worst of what she had to say. When she told him the majority of her people now fought alongside Amuni's Children and whatever was left of the shadelings in Ostania, he was left stunned. Was that their fate? His fate?

"I know what you might be thinking," Ryne said, "that it seems your people have always served an evil purpose, but that isn't so. Nerian the Shadowbearer was under the influence of another, stronger power when he led the Alzari and the Setian down the path he did. A power strong enough to defeat even one of us.

"Before and after the Shadowbearer War, the Setian and Alzari split several ways to try preserve the remnants. Some came to Granadia under the leadership of your father and Galiana. Others stayed close to the Vallum of Light, hoping to find a way to survive. Others became the Alzari clans we know today. Still, others, the ones steeped in their darkness, continued in Nerian's footsteps, which eventually led to the War of the Remnants. By then, so much had been twisted by different tellings, that much of the true histories were lost."

"It-It's just so much," Ancel said. "So much I need to relearn, so much that's different from what I believe or have read, so much I need to control. How could one people turn out this way?"

"This isn't just about you, Ancel, but the entire world." Ryne's voice softened. "Denestia as a whole has suffered, and although the Ashishin have attempted to shield Granadia from most of it, the effects are still there. But it is time for them too to understand that the world needs unity. I fear what has happened in Ostania and now here, is just the beginning of events to come. The netherlings saw you as worthy to become one of us. There has not been another granted the blessing of the Etchings in five hundred years."

Ancel's eyes bulged, and his mouth opened. "But-But, that would mean you-you're …"

“Old? Ancient?” Ryne smiled. “Yes.”

“Are you immortal?”

This time, Ryne laughed, merriment twinkling in his eyes. “No. The closest things to being immortal are the gods. Despite what I told you,” he continued, “it doesn’t mean that you’re Denestia’s savior. Some will tell you differently, and some who look for a sliver of hope may cling to you as if you’re expected to save the world. No single person can. No matter what any ridiculous prophecies say. Only the entire world can save Denestia from what is to come. You will have to work with kings and queens, commoners and thieves, the most pious and sometimes the most immoral. Our job … your job … is to get them to work toward a common goal. Survival. And the task begins with your own people.”

A flood of emotions swept through Ancel. Whatever was at stake, it appeared many believed in him changing things, not only the netherlings, Ryne, and Shin Galiana, but his father too. He remembered his mother’s smile despite her dire situation when he unleashed his power at their winery. A smile that said she expected nothing less from her son. She and his father had gone to great lengths, sacrificing much to see the small portion of their people in Eldanhill and elsewhere survived, that their heritage still lived.

No matter what was required of him, he would not disappoint. He would help change the fate of his people. He would help pave a new path. “Show me what I need to do.”

Chapter 33

Ryne couldn't help his smile and the prideful swell in his chest. Not only did Ancel continue to show his potential for learning, which so much reminded him of Kahkon, but despite the hardships, he exhibited some of the strongest traits for an Eztezian-in-training. Indomitable will and determination.

However, what he'd seen around Ancel disturbed him. In all his years, he'd yet to see the essences within an Entosis react to any being as they did to Ancel. They caressed him, appearing almost as if he and them were one. At some point, he needed to investigate the reaction. Training was what Ancel required most now.

"Your sword work and creation of the construct was to focus on the connection between the essences and emotions," Ryne instructed. "Where a normal Forger attempts to use the Eye to shut out their emotions against the essences' temptations, we Eztezians embrace those emotions through our Etchings. They make us that much more powerful."

"In other words, the stronger my feelings, the stronger I'll be?" Ancel asked.

"Yes, but there are still limits. Overdo it and we break the protection the Etchings provide. However, if you're Forging Prima, the power is further restricted by the amount you have stored. Forging beyond those limits will tear your mind and body apart. Similar to what you began when you saved me."

"Thanks for the reminder," Ancel said dryly.

Ryne smiled. He didn't want to scare his ward, but the boy had to know what he faced. "Think of what is about to happen as a test. In fact, it is a test. Back when they were more with comparable power, maybe one in a thousand would pass after gaining their first Etching. Within every test, there is a part of you that you must cling to. Your will. Your spirit. Perseverance."

"Like *The Disciplines*," Ancel said. "Bravery, prevailing, overcoming. Strength by conquering your weakness."

"Exactly. Now," Ryne continued, "I'm sure the first day you saw my Etchings and yours, you thought of tattoos or artwork. Well, to put it simply, that is what they are. They depict things that exist or have existed. Why do you think that is?"

Ancel's brows drew together in a studious frown. He squinted, emerald eyes shifting from side to side as he searched for an answer. Then his face lit up. "For the same reason a Forging won't work without a base. There needs to be something there, something tangible for the essences to draw upon."

“Good. Imagine if you could dredge up every experience you ever had, and everything you learned at any time you wanted into something physical. For sake of understanding, the Etchings are memories. Memories collected by the netherlings since the day of their creation. Combined with Prima, you call upon those memories, those drawings to summon what’s there. The constructs come forth in the form of energy, a solid, or a liquid.”

“The Streams, the Forms, and the Flows,” Ancel whispered in awe.

“Yes. Unlike the one Galiana or you made, these are sentient, each possessing a measure of intelligence.”

“They’re alive?”

“Well, not exactly. If you want to consider that they’re made of Prima which is inhabited by living beings, then technically, you could say yes,” Ryne said. “But really, they are not. They can communicate with you and are aware of what’s happening, but for the most part, they’re just memories that can make use of stored knowledge and respond to circumstances. They contain no sela, no essences of life and death.”

Teaching Ancel brought back memories of the first day Damal had used the Tenets to summon a Hengen from the Etchings on his arm. Bigger than a barn, the beast had unfurled its leathery wings and exhaled heat and cold as it screeched. The conflicting temperatures and the stench of its breath convinced him it was real, even if all of its kind was supposed to be long dead. Damal commanded the creature to fly. Dust kicked up from the ground when the Hengen took off. Ryne recalled his first lesson had been to find a way to defeat the beast.

“Did you ever fight against the gods?”

The question caught Ryne by surprise, but he answered as quickly as he could, keeping his expression flat. “No. Those battles were before my time, but the ones who taught me certainly did.”

Ancel appeared to deflate at his admission but then quickly perked up. “Did they ever tell you how they defeated Amuni and the other gods?”

“As usual you’re seeking to dive into the ocean before you know the water’s depth or how rough the sea is. The only thing going too fast ever gained a warrior is death. Each thing in its place and time. Before we even broach the subject of the gods, Hydae, or any other beast or man you might face, first comes your test and the Tenets.”

“I-”

“In this, I will not be moved.” Ryne reined in his annoyance. The same aspects that made Ancel a more than worthy student also lent to his impatience.

For the briefest of moments, Ancel’s shoulders slumped, and then

he exhaled and gave a nod.

"Good." Ryne straightened, preparing himself for what was to come. He inhaled, relishing the perfumed aromas feathering the breeze, the animal droppings staining the air, and nature's cries and calls. They became one with the picture of beauty all around him. "Now, the first part of what you must learn is that it makes no difference how you recite the Tenets. They can be done mentally or orally. The importance is your connection to Mater. Although different, remember the essences outside are made from Prima. Connect to them and to Prima within your Etchings. What is outside must join with what exists inside in harmony."

Ryne opened himself to Prima. In a torrent, the essences flooded him. He gritted his teeth against the euphoric feeling. It was like being a part of the tiniest nuances of the world, and then opening up to see the entire Omniverse. He could tell where tiny feelers from miniscule insects brushed his arms, the movement of sweat as it began to ease up his pores before his Etchings absorbed the liquids as part of the Flows. The sun beating down became one with him as he gobbled up the light and heat it offered. His feet absorbed bits of the earth.

"This is Light's Tenet. Light to balance shade. Light to show honor. Honor to show mercy."

At the same time, he thrust the power of light and heat into the Etching of the Guardians on his chest. He chose one among them.

A white luminance shot up into the air several feet from Ryne. Hand upraised to shield his eyes, Ancel stumbled away, his mouth wide, fear in his eyes.

The bar of radiance resolved into a life-like replica of Damal, his colossal figure spanning up the cliff face behind them, at least four times Ryne's height. Essences of the Streams, primarily heat and light mixed with touches of shade, encompassed his body. Transparent at first, they coalesced and became solid. Within moments, the construct of Damal was clothed in leather armor covered with Etchings. The identical way Ryne remembered him before Damal left for his final battle in Jenoah.

"Brother," Damal said, golden eyes shining, voice a rumble. "You called?"

"Yes." Ryne smiled as he nodded toward Ancel. "I have brought you a student. Ancel, this is a sentient, all that remains of my brother Damal, one of the first Eztezians."

Damal's countenance glowed. He cocked his head to one side, and then stared out toward the kinai orchard. "You brought a student, and an old friend."

Brows drawing together, Ryne squinted in the same direction. He scowled. How the woman had managed to deceive him was a mystery.

Old anger bubbled to the surface. Fists clenched, he strode toward Galiana.

Chapter 34

Galiana spun to the feel of power emanating from behind her. Reminiscent of a flood drowning an open plain, it washed over her. Even the animals grazing from the kinai fruit appeared to experience it. Their plaintive cries filled the air. Several herds trotted away.

"What-!" Mirza exclaimed.

She opened her Matersense to a surge of essences stronger than any she'd ever experienced. More powerful than when Ancel had drawn power from the Chainin. They also were different to the ones outside of the Entosis: less malevolent, calm, almost comforting.

A transparent dome of energy encompassed the area where she'd left Ryne watching over Ancel. Within its borders, she made out a titanic construct of a man stretching at least thirty feet. Dark hair in long braids hung down past his shoulders. Golden eyes dominated his face. He was staring at Ancel. Shrouded by the dome, the construct's features seemed familiar.

She attempted to draw on the essences around her, to attack the dome, but nothing happened. It wasn't that she was blocked. The essences simply did not respond to her call. Clenching her fist, she strained her mind, willing them to do as she commanded.

Nothing.

"They won't respond to you here, not if you intend to harm one of their own."

A shimmer resolved into Ryne, Etchings aglow, striding toward her.

"Wha-What is that thing?" Mirza asked. "And what's it doing to Ancel."

"Teaching him how to use his Etchings," Ryne answered. "He will be fine. I assure you. Mirza, if you don't mind, continue picking the kinai. Ancel will need some when his session is finished." He peered toward her, expression grim, eyes unflinching. "Galiana, if you will …" He gestured beyond the orchard's red blooms.

Galiana frowned at Ryne's demeanor, but his words concerning Ancel eased some of the concern from her mind. "After you."

The big man turned and strode away, his leather molding to his body like an extra covering of skin. She followed.

"What is this about?" she asked as they cleared the orchard's edge.

"You."

Galiana almost missed a step. *What could he be referring to? Unless …* She dismissed the thought. "What is it about me?"

"Don't play with me." He eased the pace and length of his steps

until she caught up to him. When she did, he stopped, and stared toward the distant mist-shrouded peaks. “You’ve made an art of hiding who you are.”

This time she did miss a step. Having not released her Matersense, she considered attempting to bind the man, but the earlier futility lent her caution. Besides, for better than a thousand years her deceptions had been perfect. She made her face into an implacable mask, betraying no emotion.

He turned to face her, his eyes jeweled pinpoints, his jaw iron. “When I’d look at you in Benez, I often thought I knew you. I mean other than being High Ashishin Galiana. And I did, Exalted Jenoah Amelie, once White, but now leader of the Gray Council.”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous. Exalted Amelie died some thousand years ago.”

“I thought the same too, until my brother’s essences revealed you.”

Ryne had to be guessing. Sure, the essences here were stronger than those outside. They matched those rumored to have existed back when the first Tribunal made the Iluminus and Damal Adelfried appointed her as Exalted. *Wait.* Openmouthed, she turned slowly and stared back the way they’d come. The giant construct was still visible. She recognized the face now.

Damal. One of the leaders among the Eztezians, her first mentor and lover. So he did die. She choked up. All these years spent hoping he had managed to save her city. If Damal was dead, then Jenoah, her home, her city, it was ….

Ryne’s words came to her again. His brother. Memories of Damal’s younger brother swept through her; a man full of life and power, destined to become one of the most powerful Eztezians. For reasons unknown, he’d thrown himself at the shade’s armies for countless years since the Kassite sealed away his brother. In the end, with no gods to fight, he’d spearheaded the attacks against his own who’d went mad. During this time, he helped create the Great Divide. After that, he’d vanished like the other Eztezians. She faced him, unable to hide the shock on her face. “Thanairen?”

His voice softened. “That was my name once, but I cast it away after my brother’s death. I flung myself headlong after the Skadwaz, seeking revenge.” For a brief moment, pain flashed across his face, before his expression soured. “Until I found out how he died.”

Jenoah Amelie-no, she couldn’t think of herself by that name now-she was Galiana Calestis. Yet, she remembered that other life, and the events leading up to Damal’s defense of her home. Instead of sending an army of Matii to help Damal, the White and Shadow Councils of the original Tribunal decided the best course was to keep

their armies on this side of the Kassite. It began the end of the Tribunal as she knew it. The Ashishin tried to reform their own since, assuming the old name, but the stain of their betrayal to one sworn to protect them tainted the relationships between the councils and the Matii. Since that day, they remained splintered.

To this day, thousands of years later, she still had faith that somehow Damal survived. If she ever surrendered to despair, she would be giving up hope on the world. The memory dredged up old pain and a longing to be by his side that she'd buried time and again.

So many years spent pointing one faction or another toward the Chronicles, all for a chance to breach the Kassite's seal and find him. A great weight settled on her shoulders. Her age, her lost life, dead lover, failure as a leader, came crashing down. If not for Ryne's hand grabbing her arm, she would have fallen to her knees.

Something else Ryne said struck her. Galiana pushed away from him. Few lived from Benez who knew her role as High Ashishin. She searched his face, studying the lines of his jaw, removing the scars on his face, imagining him without his Etchings. She gasped.

"You were also Nerian." She managed in a barely audible whisper. Now she understood why Jerem kept Ryne's existence, his identity, such a secret. All hope lost, she turned to flee, but again his massive hand on her shoulder stopped her. Slowly, she faced him.

"Yes," he said, shoulders slumping, his face becoming a cringing mass of anguish.

"Why?" she pleaded. "Why would you do that to your own people? Was it because of Damal?"

He squeezed his eyes tight. When he opened them, his face embodied serenity. "I felt when Damal died, the pain he endured. For years, I dreamt of revenge on the councils, but I had a greater purpose. A purpose given to me by him. His final words to me were that no matter how the gods turned out, the people themselves were still more important. He made me promise to put Denestia first. It's why I pushed myself so hard in battle for so many centuries after. Until I lost myself.

"My brother knew there were those among the Skadwaz who Amuni had taken for his own. Those he'd given power to match us. Helped by several of the remaining Eztezians, one of them captured me, invaded my thoughts through Manipulation, made me become Nerian. Whoever he is, he used me to help force the following of the Chronicles, as well as for one other task. Only I could release the power stored within the Great Divide. Only I could free the other Eztezians from their prison. You see, we recognized the threat we represented, but at the same time the world would one day need us. So we sealed off our power and locked ourselves away.

“This Skadwaz knew. I assume it must be by development of a Bloodline Affinity. He also used you and the other councils to keep searching out powerful Matii, to spark the wars, to create founts of sela, to feed on your emotions, to feed himself power. Tell me, who is Ancel’s mother? And don’t say she’s a High Shin or some such.”

Galiana cleared her throat, trying to find words. Finally, she said, “She’s my sister.”

“And following the Chronicles that you believed were leading you true, you found a man strong in Eztezian blood, his father.”

She nodded.

“Still there has to be more than that. I see the way Prima reacts to him.”

Galiana let out a long, protracted breath. “He was born in here.”

A stunned silence followed.

“I’ve never been inside before, but somehow she knew of this place. She said a voice told her of its existence. We came to the entrance one day. I couldn’t see it, but I could tell where the power congregated. Only Thania with her Gift was strong enough to pass through.”

When Ryne finally spoke, his voice was low. “She chose this place because of what she thought happened in Benez with her other children. She couldn’t have known what giving birth here meant or would do. Before today, I would say no one knew.” His voice became distant, lost in his assessment. “But whoever led her here did. Using your belief in the Chronicles, they guided her. They hoped to ensure the Eztezian created was powerful enough to break the Chainin. They knew Ancel’s act combined with the power I released from the Great Divide so long ago would unleash Prima into the world.”

Galiana’s mind whirled. For years, she and Jerem had worked with the belief much of the Chronicles were true, or at least predictions of what might occur. What if they were another ploy, similar to the ones the Tribunal already used? Misdirection and deception using man’s tendency to believe in a savior, destiny, in prophecy. She couldn’t believe her gullibility. How could she have not seen this? Had she not done the same when she and the other Exalted first formed the Devout so many years ago? Repeat the same words enough times and eventually it carries a truth of its own. Repeat it in the right places, to the right ears, and one can make people believe. A tightness gripped her chest. “How much of the Chronicles are lies?”

“Not lies, but a composition of dreams, nightmares, visions, theories passed down by us. If an Eztezian claimed to have been linked to all the Planes of Existence-Past, Present, and Future-who would say he was not? The gods made us. The netherlings gave us more power. Surely, we could see all things. Convincing isn’t it?

“Little exists to separate what is real from what isn’t, what is carefully crafted stories, and what might truly be prophecy. There are those among the netherlings, known as the Nine, who seek to harness power for themselves. They have been guiding us to specific paths that serve their purpose. It’s one of the reasons we decided to seal the gods themselves. To protect them. Only by killing the gods can the Nine take their places.

“Then there are other factions, some who believe the world is better off with the gods regardless of what they’ve done in the past. It’s been my suspicion over the years that they are behind the Skadwaz or *are* Skadwaz, looking to ensure their master returns. From what I witnessed at the Chainin, this Skadwaz can draw on Prima. Not only that, but its release will tempt the other remaining Eztezians. If they can find concentrations of Prima, they no longer need to find an Entosis to recharge. But why? This is all wrong.”

“I don’t believe you,” Galiana said, although what Ryne said rang with truth. “I cannot imagine deception on this grand a scale.”

“Oh?” Ryne said. “So then what you’ve taught at the Mysteras or all across Denestia is true? Or the way blame was laid at Nerian’s feet. How about that? Didn’t the Tribunal themselves fail to reveal every Matii that was at the brink to purposely goad me to act? Didn’t they play me against the Erastonians, making me believe the Erastonians were responsible for the release of shadelings into Seti? The war between Astoca and Cardia and their subsequent split was because the Tribunal considered their ancestors to be their strongest adversary, and therefore drove a wedge between them with broken treaties and mishandled trade policies. Is any of that less grand a scale? It all affected the world. You worked events the same as the Nine does. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if the Nine are planted deep in the Iluminus.”

Overwhelmed by the possibility, Galiana eyed Damal from a distance. What more of an example did she need? Damal had defended her city against a strike by the gods, but some stories and songs had it that he’d destroyed Jenoah. It wasn’t much different from how most Eztezians were normal men, outside of those from the Svenzar, but by use of constructs and with the Svenzar’s own size, the Eztezians had become synonymous with giants who protected the world.

“We need to inform the other councils,” she said, finally. “Call a gathering.”

“No,” Ryne said. “The Shadow Council will not waver in its support of Amuni, and the same can be said for the Whites and Ilumni. Both are staunch in their belief that the gods’ return is the only way to see harmony in Denestia. They’re fanatics. They would

both rather scour the world of any who did not worship their gods. Neither of them are ready. Not yet."

"Maybe, but faced with this, from the mouth of an Eztezian, they would have to change."

"Wishful thinking, but you know better than that. They would see me dead."

"Then it's just us of the Gray. We still hold onto much of what the Tenets and Principles taught us. Besides, we probably have the greatest army of Matii seeing that-" She cut herself off. Why did she suddenly feel the need to work with Ryne, with Nerian? Did she dare believe what he said about being Manipulated? Suppose he was doing the same to her? She squinted but saw no Forging from the man.

"I see suspicion creeping across your face," Ryne said. "If I wanted to harm the boy, or you, or Stefan or any others, I could have. Not one among you possesses the power to stop me."

"Still as arrogant as ever, I see."

"If it makes you feel any better, I swear in my brother's name and by the blessings of the Streams, that I mean no harm. It is Denestia I want to help save."

Oaths were not something Thanairen gave lightly. She'd never known him to break one. "Very well. What do you suggest we do?"

"First, Ancel must finish this portion of his training. Then we gather the rest of the Grays, find the other Eztezians, and discover the location of this Skadwaz. Instead of defending, it's time we strike."

A stab of sadness poked at Galiana's chest. It must have shown or her face, because Ryne frowned at her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Only three of the original Grays still live. The years of war with the White and Shadow have taken its toll. Only Sol Remus, Trucida Adler, and I are left."

Ryne leaned back, face held to the sky, and shook his head. "Nothing is ever easy." He looked at her once more. "Where are they?"

"Remus, you met already."

"Let me guess … Jerem?"

She nodded. Even when he was younger, Thanairen had a knack for discovering the most intricate plots. "He is in Calisto, most likely. He has been working as much as he dared on this side of the Vallum and in Ostania. Trucida, last I heard, was somewhere in Everland. So you know, the Pathfinders belong to Jerem now."

"The same Pathfinders who have been killing Matii? Depleting our numbers? Why hasn't he reined them in?"

Galiana shrugged. "You can ask him when we get to Calisto." She didn't fully trust the man, and in ways, making them seem weaker

than they were at present might work in her favor in case he had some treachery planned. What happened to the Setian under Nerian's rule still gave her nightmares. That brought up another issue. How was she going to reveal this to Stefan?

"Well," Ryne said, "Harval and Calisto it is then."

"And afterward?"

"A land to reclaim."

Chapter 35

From where he lay on the flattened grass, Ancel glared at the colossal sentient. The construct, had called itself Damal, Ryne's brother and once a leader of the Eztezians. Supposedly the same Damal from legend, the one minstrel's sang about, the one who according to the stories had sacrificed himself for Denestia, or destroyed Jenoah, depending on which telling you believed. Frustrated at yet another failure, Ancel punched the ground and got to his feet.

"Good, boy. I see fire in your eyes. It becomes you." The sentient grinned, its mouth a yawning cavern.

Time had become a forgotten concept for Ancel. Days had bled into nights and into days again, each filled with near incessant training. Occasional rest and pauses to allow for a meal or a drink when Ryne, Galiana, or Mirza brought him food and kinai were the only breaks to the monotony. Beyond them asking after his well-being, Damal didn't allow much conversation, cutting off any attempt at an extended talk. The kinai juice or fruit they brought was sweeter than any he had before, even his mother's. Each time he partook, it more than simply invigorated him; the kinai drove away all fatigue, making him feel as if he could run a hundred miles, fight a dozen battles. Damal pushed him harder soon afterward.

And still, he'd learned nothing. Or at least that's how he felt.

"I continue to tell you," Damal's mouth twitched into a smirk Ancel had grown to loathe, "these are not the essences outside that do your bidding simply by drawing on them. You must not only command Prima, but you must have absolute belief in what you do. Doubt yourself for one moment, one instant, and they will refuse your call."

Easy for you to say. You're not facing a three-storied house in the shape of a man.

"Succumbing to intimidation is weakness. Showing and reacting to fear are signs of doubt. Believe in Prima with the same fervor you would if you prayed for Ilumni's help," Damal commanded.

Ancel sighed. Regardless of how many times he tried, he found it difficult to apply the concepts. Belief in a god was one thing. Belief that the essences were his to command despite how they fought him was another. After witnessing what they could do, his fear was warranted. How could he forget he faced an Eztezian, a myth, a legend, here before him? Even though not of flesh and blood, Damal was no less real.

Sweat trickled down his brow as Ancel raised his sword once

more. His last helping of kinai had been hours before, and both his legs and arms were beginning to feel like massive logs. Striated with both air and water essences, a transparent dome spread above and around them. The shield absorbed the impact of his body whenever he failed to block Damal's Forgings. Its edges cushioned him as it bent, but never broke. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. He refused to wipe at where it crawled from the corner of his lip and down into his bushy beard.

The beard reminded him yet again of how long he must have been inside the Entosis. At least three weeks by his count, but the growth said it had to be more.

He was still thinking when a soft whine made him glance up. A shaft of heat and light made solid by use of air slammed into his chest. The impact blew him backward. He flew at least twenty feet before he crashed into the barrier that this time wasn't so forgiving.

Spots dancing before his eyes, he crawled to his feet. His head throbbed. Someone was speaking. Or at least he thought he heard words mixed in with the ringing in his head. His vision of Damal split into a dozen parts before becoming one again. A lopsided grin split its features, but its eyes weren't smiling.

Enraged, Ancel charged Damal, sword out before him. He pulled on whatever essences he could, flinging Forgings at the sentient. All the skills he'd learned.

He sent fire blazing in a trail across the ground, leaving a swath of blackened grass in its wake. At the same time, he cast several balls of flame in a curving arc from the right and left. He connected with the skies above, finding particles of energy there, drawing on them to form lightning. Using the sun's beams, he also whipped forth a spear of heat and light to strike at an angle above the blaze speeding toward Damal.

A single strike of lightning tore from the sky. The fire wave, the balls, and the spear struck at the same time. They dissipated before they hit Damal, not even leaving a concussion.

The sentient grinned even more broadly. "I told you such petty Forges will not work on one such as I." He flung a hand out.

Ancel felt as if the hand snatched him and tossed him sideways. He tried to turn to soften his fall, or at least roll, but he landed in a heap. Pain shot up his side and arm.

"You are weak, boy. You will stop no one in your current state. Pitiful."

Ancel's ribs throbbed and his arm hung limp as he struggled up onto his feet. He would not give in. Even if he had to fight to his death. Attempting to will the hurt away, he drew in ragged breaths. This time, he approached Damal carefully, one slow step at a time,

grimacing as pain lanced up his side. Ancel gauged the distance between them, searching for any revealing movement or shift in the essences to signify an attack. The sentient simply watched him with a bemused expression.

The self-satisfied smile irked Ancel more than his failure. Steeling himself, he brought his sword down and dashed in. When he drew on the essences, he used them to strengthen his blade and lend him speed. Sword in one hand, he struck with a series of attacks, using primarily the Streams, feeding his annoyance into the Stances.

He swept from slices to stabs, kicks and lunges, faster and faster, more random with each strike. The jarring impact of his relatively tiny sword against Damal's oversized weapon vibrated through his arms. Not once did Damal move his feet, but he parried each blow. The sentient was so large that all it needed to do was slightly shift its weapon. Ancel growled under his breath at the apparent ease with which Damal defended.

Reinforcing his arms with the strength of earth, Ancel swung harder. With the Streams, he moved faster. In his mind's eye, he was a blur of movement.

Yet none of it mattered.

One sweep of its other hand, and Damal sent him soaring back into the barrier once more. He landed hard, rolling through dirt and grass, shearing skin from his forearm. Unable to move, he lay there, panting. Numerous aches and burns scoured his body. Exhaustion threatened to overwhelm him.

"I hope there are none you hold dear … a sister, a brother, a lover, a mother, a father … If there are, consider them dead. To stand against the Skadwaz, the shade, or any creature from beyond the Kassite is a fool's dream for you. You may as well give up. Admit failure in this test."

A piece of Ancel broke. Despair coiled inside him, threatening to choke him He'd wanted to become stronger to save his mother if she was still alive. Now, his father might also need his aid. With the chance in front of him here, all he'd managed was failure after failure. To add to it all, he'd finally reconciled with Irmina, only to have that snatched from him. And what of his people? Where were they now? Captured and imprisoned by the Tribunal? Or dead at the hands of a shadeling? On and on, voices and thoughts warred in his head.

A memory whispered in the back of his mind to seek the Eye. He did. Its confines did little to quench his heated emotions. A pull beyond its edges drew him. It was as if a light shone in the distance, beckoning him. Within all his fears lay something else.

It allowed him to stand after falling. Each time he thought he had no more, he'd found another reserve. He allowed his mind, body, and

soul to drift to that light. When he touched it, he immediately recognized its caress.

His will. A simple refusal to lose.

Instead of picking out each individual feeling as they surged within him, Ancel took his will and with it, he thrust all his passion, fury, despair, all his aggression into the Streams represented by the Etchings on his arm and chest.

Damal would learn not to take him lightly.

Ancel no longer cared how long it took. He would be with Irmina again. He would save his father from imprisonment. He would help fulfill his father's wish in bringing their people back together in Seti. He would find the black-armored man and defeat him. He would free Mother.

And I will pass this test.

"Light to balance shade. Light to show honor. Honor to show mercy," he whispered.

Essences flooded him. He surrendered to them. White flashed through his vision. Light blinded him. Heat wilted his body. He screamed, expelling all that he was into the Etchings.

He felt more than he saw the being that burst forth. In an incandescent haze, it shot up into the air, taller, bigger, and more powerful than Damal. The construct was featureless, made of a blinding glow that made Ancel shield his eyes for a moment. As the light dimmed, it grew into the image of a stern-faced man wielding a sword of pure energy. From what he felt, Ancel knew he'd called forth a sentient.

The old voices of power stopped their gibbering even inside the Eye. He felt a connection between them and the essences he now held. The Entosis' Mater uttered two words to them. They were tinged with scorn.

"Be gone."

The malignant voices fled.

With eyes like sunlight, his sentient brought its attention to bear on Damal. The Eztezian gasped, and then bowed.

Chest heaving, Ancel could only stare. A noise next to him turned out to be Ryne, his expression one of awe.

"Your Prima construct," Ryne intoned, "is one of Ilumni's Battleguards. Praise Ilumni." Reverence filled his voice.

Ancel's gaze was riveted on the Battleguard. Somehow, he found his voice. "But-but they aren't real. They're stories." *Stories to make men have something to believe in, to push faith.* "Aren't they?"

"It was from the Battleguards that the gods created the original Eztezians," Ryne said.

"Finally." The sound came from the Battleguard. It was like a

whisper on the wings of the wind. “One with righteous anger. My name is Etien. I am yours.”

A prickling sensation ran along Ancel’s arms, legs, and body. He held up his forearms. Etchings appeared, their artwork exquisite, displaying creatures, celestial bodies, what appeared to be moonlight, sunshine, and energy arcing through the air. Yet, as he looked he could tell they were incomplete. Still, he couldn’t help his shock.

“Once you have mastered one essence of an Etching, the rest of the power within it appears,” Etien declared. “Now, you must gain the others to complete the element of Streams and harness its full strength.”

Ancel trembled, but not from fear, from sheer pride, excitement, and the immense potency coursing through his Etchings.

Chapter 36

Almost two weeks since he'd gained Etien, Ancel and the others trekked through the snowdrifts of the Red Ridge Mountains toward Harval. He'd felt him coming, and sure enough, Charra had arrived soon after his ordeal and stayed close to him, often licking his Etchings, his tongue like leather layered with sand. Ancel found it quite odd, Charra's reaction. As odd as the other points, similar to his bonds, that he sensed way to the north. He wondered what they could be before his mind drifted to Ryne's revelation that he'd spent nine months in the Entosis learning to summon Etien. It was equivalent to three months in Denestia's time. He hoped the rest of his training would be easier.

According to Galiana, they were heading to Harval to use a Travelshaft. Ancel couldn't help the excitement bubbling within him at the prospect. He'd once dreamed of using the tunnels built by the Svenzar connecting each city across Denestia.

Ryne spent most days teaching him one Forge or another but nothing too powerful. The classes ranged from those as mundane as drawing water from wet wood, then using air and heat to start a fire, to how to hide his Forges. That last actually required using more of the Flows and Forms, which he often found difficult to do, but once he grasped a sense of it, he saw how the air and earth intertwined to make what he did disappear. If he concentrated hard enough, he picked out a slight distortion, but he needed to be within a few feet.

While training in the Entosis, another notable ability had become a part of him. His skill to see auras had increased to where it existed for the majority of his waking hours. Most of the time, he used it unconsciously, identifying small facets within the colorful swirls of his companions' auras that reflected their intentions.

In the days since they renewed their trek, his mind constantly drifted to his father, his mother, and Irmina. His mood grew dark every time. The safety of Eldanhill's other refugees also weighed on him. His father had left their survival in his hands, and he'd dashed it all away to save Ryne. He could only hope he'd made the correct decision.

Since returning from the Entosis, the link he felt through the pendant resonated with increased strength. He could almost pinpoint its location. Somewhere to the north. As tempting as it was to go racing off to discover if she was alive, he knew better. Discovering more about his enemy and saving what remained of the Setian was the first priority.

"Mirza," Shin Galiana said, with a quick glance at his friend. "You

know a few of the folk in Harval, yes?" Mirza nodded. "I need you to control that excitement of yours. Do not speak to anyone concerning us. Ever. Should anyone ask a question of you, tell them to see me. You too, Ancel."

"Yes, Shin Galiana," they both replied.

The evening air was crisp and cold, but not the freezing temperature from the prior days. Ryne and Galiana appeared to have become friends, chatting between each other and laughing. Sometimes Ancel felt as if he was watching two old acquaintances. Mirza also seemed to have taken to them better than before. He asked so many questions of them both, and at night, Ryne had begun showing his friend how to use the scythe Mirza now favored. He'd picked up the weapon thinking it was a spear back in Eldanhill. His friend was becoming quite adept with the weapon.

When it came to Ancel, Mirza acted differently, almost reverential. It was as if Mirza saw a different person in him. Ancel often caught him staring, eyes wide with wonder, and sometimes with fear. His friend would offer a forced smile then or avert his eyes. Whenever Ancel spoke to him, their conversation drifted to home in Eldanhill, but like the smiles, their talks felt out of place, an avoidance of what troubled Mirza. Ancel missed their playful banter.

Since they left the Entosis, Ancel opened his Matersense regularly, acclimating himself to the difference between the essences. He came to realize his Etchings sifted them, storing a miniscule amount. The voices clamored to him more than ever, but with the Eye, he brushed them off. He was in command. They raged against him, but he simply shut them out.

As they walked, he prayed for his father's well-being and tried not to think of his mother. Twice the nightmares of the black-armored man made him wake in cold sweats. Only once did he have another dream where he stood within Jenoah, protecting the city from the gods' attack while yelling the sword's name.

Antonjur. At some point, he needed to question Ryne about it.

Lost in his thoughts, he almost failed to notice when the mining trail changed into a pass several hundred feet wide. He glanced up at the white, shimmering cliffs around them. The wind howled through the pass, a beast of icy fangs that snatched at his furs.

The first hint of a town came from muddy snow and travel-beaten ground beneath them, now stained red as if tinged with blood. It was a reflection of the sandy earth below that would become all too apparent in the long summer's baking heat. The second hint came from Charra's low growl and the three thick-furred dogs that appeared, barking excitedly. A solid looking man garbed in furs stepped out from one of the walls, chased away the dogs, and melted

into the stone again.

Mirza tapped Ancel on the shoulder and pointed into the air ahead of them. Ancel had to look twice for his mind to conceive what his eyes witnessed.

Suspended in the air above them, stone bridges connected one wall of the pass to the other, stretching up as far as his eyes could see. Battlements lined the cliffs at varying levels, appearing to be natural phenomena. The sun glinted off translucent icicles hanging from the bridges' underbellies like bejeweled death. Ancel lost count at thirty similar structures. Occasionally, a face would appear over the edge of a span, peering in their direction. Every crossing ended at an opening in the palisades that stretched to each side on the edge of the cliffs, hiding the paths beyond. The walls, cliffs, and bridges were carved from the same rock, as if a god chiseled it into shape.

The cliff faces sparkled with a fading, orange luminescence: reflections of the dying sunlight upon the many stones and metal contained within. Ancel stared in wonder as lights appeared in openings above the battlements and in the mountain itself. His mouth opened of its own volition. *Those are windows.*

Subtle changes in the form of the cliffs turned out to be buildings, parts of them hidden by the walled paths or roads. Homes, he realized. Rounded and square roofs jutted out before becoming one with the stone from which they originated.

"Amazing right?" Mirza grinned next to him.

"When …"

"I first came here with my father a few months before Danvir, you, and I left for Randane. I couldn't believe my eyes either." Mirza gestured around them. "All of this sitting here in the mountains. I tried to tell you about it, but you were still mooning over Irmina." He pointed ahead of them. "Come let's catch up to the others."

Ancel shook himself and looked around. He had stopped to stare at his surroundings. Ahead of them, Shin Galiana and Ryne stood waiting. They spurred their horses and caught up.

Distant clangs in a familiar, constant rhythm echoed. *A smithy?* The sound repeated around him from dozens of directions. He was certain they were hammers. He discerned the shushing sounds of steam on hot metals, mixed in with other clanking noises. There must have been hundreds of blacksmiths. Where the chimneys for each were located, he could not tell. Occasionally, he noticed a low rumble of what he thought to be a cart's wheels, and a loud, squeaking noise he did not recognize.

"There's at least fifty smithies here." Mirza paused and licked his lips, his apprehension obvious. Normally he would rattle off whatever it was he knew.

“Go on,” Ancel encouraged.

Mirza smiled sheepishly and nodded. “Harval also has a quarrying operation, and only Ilumni knows, how many carts going back and forth from the mines deep in these cliffs. The squeaking? The wheels of an ore tram. Someone needs to get to oiling. They usually have six or seven of them hitched together. You know,” a thoughtful expression pinched his face, “I can’t figure out how they get them to move or stop on those rails.”

“Earth and air essences,” Shin Galiana said. “Air to move and earth to stop.”

“They use Ashishin to run them?” Ancel’s brows climbed his forehead.

Shin Galiana gave him a look that said he should know better. “Do not be foolish. Almost all in Harval are Dagodin.”

Ancel had not expected to hear that either. “But shouldn’t they be off fighting …” His voice trailed off.

“Dagodin are good for other things besides weapons. Without the ones adept in using *divya* tools, we wouldn’t be able to build much of what we do. This town would not exist.” She gestured up at the cliffs. “Harval is an old town and produces most of the stone and metals used throughout Barham and Doster, the same as Eldanhill and the villages to the north provided for Sendeth. Much of the *divya* created here are for quarrying and mining.”

“Weapons too,” Mirza added.

Galiana inclined her head.

Ancel frowned. If they did produce that much, then Harval must have several dozen Imbuers. He always wanted to see how they worked their craft. The books considered them something of an enigma, more Dagodin than Ashishin. The Tribunal only recognized Matii who could use their Forges in battle as Ashishin.

By now, they stood directly under a vast majority of the stone bridges. With the amount of homes, Ancel would have expected there to be a pungent stench from drainage or refuse, but there was only a slight whiff. Curious, he searched for drains. He picked them out near the cliffs, each disappearing into the rocky foundation.

Shin Galiana led them into a gateway, several dozen feet wide and tall, carved into the cliff on their left. It opened into an impossibly large cavern, housing line after line of stables and pens. The smell of manure and livestock permeated the air along with a cacophony of animal cries. The cavern contained various domesticated animals, from horses to fowl.

On spindly legs, backs littered with small humps, several slainen ate from a trough. Their beady eyes ignored everything around them as they chewed contentedly. More than a quarter of the pens

contained hibernating dartans. The creatures appeared as little more than large, mottled shells, their limbs withdrawn into their carapaces.

Ancel glanced from Mirza to Shin Galiana. Mirza had one of those silly grins on his face again. Curious, Ancel backed his horse up outside the door. The sounds died. He opened his mouth to ask how but stopped. A Forging.

He returned inside. Several young boys mucked out stables and pens. They washed them down with buckets of water into drains that ran along the back of each stall. A couple of dogs lazed about, barely raising their heads at the newcomers. One of them trotted over to Charra and sniffed at him. Charra growled. Head bowed, the dog slunk back to its original spot and lay down.

"Shin Galiana," exclaimed a rotund, pock-faced old man, with short, straight hair and a bald spot on the crown of his head. "Pleasant surprise. It's been the Ewald Stables' blessing of late to be graced by this many Ashishin." The man's watery gaze drifted to Ryne several times. He shook his head.

Shin Galiana nodded to the man. "Nice to see you also, Master Ewald."

He gestured behind him. "Been a busy week as you can see. Why, with rumors of troubles beyond the Vallum, and the recent clashes in Sendeth, business has increased tenfold." His eyes darted from side to side; he took a breath and added, "I heard Eldanhill was involved. Something about the Setian returning."

Master Ewald's voice reminded Ancel of when he had a hoarse throat. A raspy mix of whispering and coughs. Shin Galiana had a barely noticeable frown on her face as she regarded the stable master.

"You should not believe everything you hear, Master Ewald," Galiana's expression gave away nothing. "Some things are not worth repeating. Others are … like the rumors of these troubles at the Vallum."

The stable master nodded as if satisfied with Galiana's answer. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Don't mention you heard it from me, Shin Galiana, but some of the peddlers from Torandil have said war is brewing."

Galiana gave the man a skeptical look. "But there is always war beyond the Vallum."

Ewald peered around nervously. "Not like this. I heard there's been more fighting than usual. Our armies have actually lost ground. But you did not hear any of that from me, Shin Galiana, no, you did not."

"I will remember not to mention it."

Master Ewald bowed to her. "Where's my manners. Welcome, welcome back to Harval." He gave Mirza a nod and a grin. "And you

Master Faber, tell your father that Milnar is looking for him. He has some new ore and a new mine Devan may be interested in."

Mirza returned the grin.

Ewald stroked the stubble on his chin. "And you must be … wait don't tell me," he said, as Ancel opened his mouth. "I would know that face anywhere. Stefan Dorn's boy. You're welcome here too, lad." He smiled at Ancel's nod of affirmation. Finally, he gave Ryne another once over. "And," he paused, "any friend of Shin Galiana's is welcome here also."

Ryne actually smiled and nodded to Ewald. "Call me Ryne."

He held out one of his massive hands to the stable master, who stepped forward and took it tentatively. Ewald's eyes widened, while he shook Ryne's hand.

"Ah, my manners again," said Ewald, with a shake of his head. "Dismount, the boys will take your horses."

Ewald signaled to several of the stable hands who were gawking at Ryne.

"Master Ewald," Shin Galiana said after they dismounted, "you mentioned that quite a few Ashishin visited Harval."

The stable master nodded.

"Are they still here?"

"Why, yes. I think they may be at the town hall or the Stoneman's, or both." Ewald put a hand to his chin as he contemplated his answer.

"Hmm. Tell me, since it has been so busy, which of the inns do you think still has room?"

Ewald stroked his chin briefly before he answered. "Why, the Stoneman, of course. I'm sure Master Gebbert has space on the upper floors." He eyed them for a moment. "And the warmest baths too."

Instinctively, Ancel looked down at the grime and dirt covering his furs. He had not realized just how dirty they had become.

"Thank you, Master Ewald." Galiana reached into the folds of her clothes. Moments later came a distinctive clink as coins changed hands. "That will be all."

Ewald's cheeks reddened. "Thank you, Shin Galiana. Well, I will leave you to it then and return to my work." He hurried off.

Outside the stables, night had descended on Harval, and bright lamps illuminated the walls of the buildings. Galiana led them up a path, and before long, they traversed cobbled, drain-lined roads next to cliff homes. They encountered few people on the streets as most of the populace had retired to their homes. Those they came across wore thick fur coats and hats. Ancel shivered despite his clothing. The temperature had dropped considerably, the wind wailing through the pass. In counterpoint to the slight reek of the drains along the streets,

the air was refreshing on the bridges. The incessant work at the smiths continued as if the day had only just begun. Higher and higher they went, crisscrossing from one side to the other. Below them, the town sparkled, lamps and windows like small lightflies.

Soon, they stood in front of a four-storied structure, a sign outside proclaiming it to be the Stoneman's Inn. Shin Galiana pulled open the door, and held it while they passed inside. The soft tinkle of music and shaded lamps greeted them. Ryne had to duck to enter. Mirza found it funny and copied Ryne's entrance, which held its own humor because the door dwarfed Mirza. Ancel smiled.

They stood in a spacious, plain room with several stone benches against a wall. A table, made of smooth, milky-white stone, dominated one side of the room. Ancel had never seen the like. A buxom woman with earth-colored hair sat behind it.

The woman's eyes grew round at seeing Ryne and narrowed when they took in Charra. But when her gaze reached Shin Galiana, her eyes nearly popped out of her head. She jumped to her feet, smoothing her blue dress.

"Blessed Shin, welcome to the Stoneman." She bowed from the waist. "I'm Hylda. One moment please, I will fetch Master Gebbert."

Before Shin Galiana could utter a word, the woman had slipped through a door behind her.

Glass lamps hung from metal braces around the room. No flames flickered within the glass. Ancel crossed the room and examined one of the lamps. He could feel the heat from it, but still could not discern any actual flames. A red hue emanated from within. Even without his Matersense, he understood. He sucked in a breath and turned to Mirza.

"I know. Firelamps," his friend said with a grin that he soon wiped away.

Ancel started to reply when a man with a chest like double doors, bright eyes and a mouth that snarled when he smiled, entered the room with Hylda at his heels. Burn scars crawled down the side of his face until they disappeared under his shirt. The skin was blotchy and layered in a few places where it had grown over itself several times, leaving that side of his face leathery.

The man ignored Ancel's stare. He gave a small start when his gaze took in Ryne before he composed himself. "Welcome, Shin Galiana. Hylda, prepare the steam baths." With a frown in Ryne's direction, he added, "And the pool." The good half of his face twisted in distaste at the sight of Charra. "We don't normally allow animals, Blessed Shin."

"Make an exception in this case," Galiana said. "Charra is a well-mannered daggerpaw."

Gebbert sighed. “Come, I’ll show you to your rooms.”

Shin Galiana thanked the innkeeper. They followed him through to the next room. This time, Ryne did not need to duck.

They entered a circular walkway where the music’s volume increased. Loud laughter and the buzz of conversation mixed with the tinkle of dishes. Mirza signaled for Ancel to follow him next to the chest-high wall on their left. He copied his friend and peered over the side.

The inn had nine floors in all, five below them, all lined with similar walkways. Pillars supported each floor at specific intervals. Flights of stairs on opposite sides led to landings. The walls, pillars, and floors were all of the same smooth, white stone. Ancel rubbed his hand along it. Marble.

“The Stoneman is one of the most expensive Inns in Harval.” Mirza had a twinkle in his eyes. “And the most fun.”

The expanse of the bottom floor contained the common room, filled with dancing and carousing patrons. The Whitewater Inn could easily fit inside the Stoneman ten times over. Liveried servers bustled from table to table to patrons, and on a marble stage, a scantily clad woman danced and sang.

She swayed seductively, her melodious voice like the sweet tinkles of a chime, as she sang to the strumming of a harpist sitting behind her. Seeing her dance immediately sparked memories of Kachien and Irmina. Would he see either of them again?

Mirza snickered. “That,” he said, pointing at the girl as if she did not stand out, “is one of the reasons I love this place.”

Ancel reluctantly turned away from the wall and hurried to catch up with the others, Mirza chuckling next to him as they continued on their way.

“Master Faber,” Gebbert said, “I would welcome you downstairs, but your father gave me a scolding the last time. The man has a tongue like salted steel.”

Disappointment flashed across Mirza’s face, but one look from Shin Galiana wiped it away. Ancel grinned at his friend this time as they reached the stairs and went up several flights.

“Ah, Master Gebbert,” Shin Galiana said, as if she just remembered something. “I heard that a few Ashishin have visited Harval. Are they at the town hall?”

Gebbert shook his head. “I see old Master Ewald has been blabbering again. No, Shin Galiana, they aren’t.”

“Oh?”

“Each one was dispatched to a weaponsmith. From what the smithies been saying, they’re helping the Imbuers. I’ve never seen this many *divya*. Not in my lifetime. Some say it’s the Luminance War all

over again."

Shin Galiana had a thoughtful look on her face. "Thank you, Master Gebbert."

"Well, here we are, Shin Galiana, these are the only two rooms left. Yours is down the hall, one door over."

"Two are more than enough." Galiana's brows were drawn together in a tight frown. Ancel wondered what troubled her.

"They're both royal suites," Gebbert added, the good half of his face beaming, "usually reserved for dignitaries and such. I can have some attendants bring over a couple of beds for the young men."

Shin Galiana shook herself. "Thank you again."

"You're most welcome." The innkeeper hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I'd be careful around the other Ashishin if I were you, Shin Galiana." Gebbert paused.

"Continue," Galiana encouraged.

He cleared his throat. "Two months ago, several Pathfinders and a High Shin, think his name was Cantor, came to Harval. They were asking after you four."

A sense of panic grew in Ancel's chest. Mirza hissed.

"Are they still here?" Galiana asked.

"No, but almost everyone knows they were looking for you. Especially with him." He nodded to Ryne. "Not too many fit the description of a giant with tattoos. If I were you, I'd leave as soon as I can. Harval may be a neutral town and all, but it's only a matter of time before someone sends word to the Tribunal."

Galiana nodded, her lips drawing into a tight line. "Well then, Gebbert, pass the word among the Matii here. Reclamation has come."

Chapter 37

T*hree months.* Irmina let out a resigned sigh as she stared out the stained glass windows. From her vantage, the Iluminus' eastern spires and towers spread like shiny javelins. Beyond the structures and the latticework walkways, the Vallum of Light was a white serpent devouring the darkened countryside. Within the city, the resonance of the essences imbued in the fabric that made up every structure took on a soft, muted glow. As usual, not a shadow formed within the vast city. A reassurance of the superiority of the Streams, of Ilumni's blessing, of the strength of light and heat, and yet, the luminosity failed to shed light where darkness resided. Within the hearts of men.

Three months and still no sign of Ancel, Ryne, and whoever else had been with them. Not even the slightest hint that the link she had with him ever existed. She wondered if it had even been real. By the time the other search party had come close to retaking the Eldanhill refugees, they'd crossed from the territory near the Kelvore River and into Doster proper. Rather than spark more animosity, they had retreated to avoid a clash with the waiting Dosteri army.

Both parties empty-handed. To say the Exalted weren't pleased was an understatement. They had been unwilling to accept the daggerpaws and the storm as an excuse, going so far as to threaten bodily harm. The one aspect that seemed to stay their discipline was losing several Pathfinders, a High Shin, and the entire complement of trackers.

Of the Exalted, only two remained in Eldanhill: Leukisa and Ordelia. The others had taken the Eldanhill Council, most of the army, and returned to the Iluminus. All the council members were alive, if a little battered from their torture. Exactly the purpose of the two Exalted, twenty thousand Dagodin, and one cohort of Ashishin, Irmina was unsure, but knowing they were in Eldanhill left uneasiness in her gut.

She inhaled in an attempt to relax, the bellflower candles she burned adorning the air with their aroma. What was there for her to do now? She'd spent the last two months practicing with the Raijin, familiarizing herself once more with the various aspects of their combat formations. Not that she needed to, but she preferred to occupy herself to keep her mind off her current thoughts. A muffled knock issued from the door.

Schooling herself to calm, she strode across the lavish carpets. She pulled open the door, expecting a student bearing her dinner. The tray of food was there, sitting on a wooden stand. From the mouthwatering scent, it was roasted fish and creamed potatoes as she'd ordered, along

with some wine. There was no sign of the servant or student who'd delivered the meal.

Irmina peered down and up the hall. She heard no retreating footsteps. With a shrug and a frown, she picked up the tray and paused. The lines on her forehead grew tighter. The food seemed unusually heavy.

She retreated into her room, pushing the door shut with the toe of her boot. After waiting a moment to see if anyone revealed themselves beyond the door, she turned and headed to the dinner table. Gingerly, she set down the tray.

Without much effort, she sensed the essences there. The tray bore the High Jin's personal mark etched into the wood alongside an insignia of a four-legged animal standing next to a person. A wavy line stretched from the person's head to the creature. The ancient sign of the beasttamers.

Irmina's mind drifted to the day of her questioning. High Jin Quintess had not broached the subject of what punishment she was to face, instead stating that once the High Seats finished, that she was to immediately report to the Exalted. However, she'd been ordered to visit Quintess' office prior to her trip to them. She recalled the meeting.

"It may seem ironic," Quintess said, "but do you know what I dislike above all else, Irmina?" She was a foot shorter than Irmina but the way she carried herself left little doubt as to who held authority.

"No, High Jin."

"I dislike secrets."

When Irmina gave the statement some thought, it *was* ironic. The woman led the Raijin, the Tribunal's foremost assassins and infiltrators. Their life was secrecy. She remained quiet, not voicing her opinion.

Quintess' office wasn't what she expected. For a woman in her position, Irmina had assumed finery would fill the room, as well as artifacts pertaining to Quintess' station. Instead, aged books, tomes, scrolls, maps and various paintings crammed the shelves, every desk, most spaces along the walls, cabinets, and even the cushioned benches and chairs. Some stacks appeared ready to tip over. The room was more suitable for a philosopher or one of the Great Library's Custodians.

"I was a Custodian once, a long time ago," Quintess said, as if reading her thoughts. "So long in fact that I remember your parents before you were born. I knew many of your family. Your aunt, Jillian, was once a student of mine. As a young girl, I was besotted with Garrick Nagel. What would he be now? Your grandfather by six or

seven generations?"

"Seven." Irmina fought against the surge of questions she craved to ask.

"Sadly, even he had his secrets, and they cost him his life." Disgust twisted the High Jin's face for a moment. She focused on Irmina. "As yours might cost you."

"I don't know what you mean." Irmina met her gaze without blinking.

A hint of a smile played across Quintess' face. "I would expect no less from a Shin trained by Jerem. Soon, though, you will be one of mine."

Irmina bit back a retort. She belonged to no one.

"There are times I wish I lived in the days when all the Matii were at peace and called the first Iluminus their home. Do you know that legend says it floated in the sky where the Great Divide is now located?"

"No, I did not know, High Jin." Irmina wondered if there was a point to the conversation beyond hinting at whatever secret she kept.

"Have you ever considered the reason for the split between Matii?"

"War, strife, religious differences, philosophy, the shade …"

"No. It's much simpler than that, Irmina." Quintess paused for effect. "Greed. The common hunger among all men for more power. Power to challenge the gods. At least that's what I believe, but what do I know?"

Irmina arched an eyebrow. "Is this why you brought me here?"

Quintess made a noise in her throat that was neither denial nor approval. "Truth be told, Shin Irmina, yes. I brought you here because greed surrounds us. It will be our downfall. That and secrets. First, I will let you in on one. Originally, those of your family who were slaughtered carried the same ability as you. That of a beasttamer. You are the last of your line with the skill. Jillian comes close, but not quite. Whether she herself is in danger, I cannot tell, but someone has worked for years to see what you are remains a secret. Although it is quite surprising that none of the other councils have been able to influence the woman. I wonder what agenda she follows." Frowning, Qunitess paused for a moment. "Anyway, I also suspect you are keeping something else to yourself, something important, and it has to do with your trip to Ostania. Eventually, I will have it, but first, I want your trust. Open your Matersense."

Irmina embraced her Matersense now and picked out the essences Quintess had shown her. Apply heat, untwist light, remove the padding of air, and there on the tray sat a box the length of her arm

and more than three hand's span thick. The whorls in the polished wood spoke of age and care.

Food forgotten, she picked up a note that rested on top the box. She opened it.

Raijin Irmina,

If you are reading this letter then the either the White or the Shadow have found a way to silence me. Not many of us are left who are loyal to the Gray Council ever since our leaders fled the Iluminus. Beware even the White, as they no longer serve the ideals they should. You may ask how I know what I do. Well, throughout the world, there are those who support what the Gray, and all of Matii once stood for, that of protector. Many of them have given their lives as Listeners, picking out stories, finding truths, spying when needed, and relaying it all to those with the power to act. People like myself. Among those, you will find the most support.

Within the pages of this book are the truths I have collected over the years by deciphering the twisted teachings of the Exalted and the Shadow Council. You will also find the known members of each Council, and those who can be trusted. Use the information wisely, as you, Ancel, and Nerian will need it. Yes, I know who Ryne is or was.

As long as I am not dead, you may visit my office and search among the wealth of knowledge there. Not even the Custodians know I have copied the original books. With the Forge I taught you, you will be able to see where I pointed out discrepancies on specific pages. You can compare them to the changed versions in the Great Library.

You will understand once you read the book.

One other issue. Try your best not to let any in the Iluminus become aware of your ability as a tamer. Only one such as yourself can communicate with the mind of a zyphyl. When the day comes that the vasumbrals are unleashed, you will have to free the zyphyl as instructed within this tome. They will be your only hope.

Truth is to lie as order is to chaos.

Quintess.

Hands trembling, Irmina Forged. The letter burst into flames. She released it from her hand and watched as it drifted to the ground, still burning, and then turned to ash. With another Forge, she blocked her door.

Irmina unraveled the seal around the box. The lid eased open of its own accord. Inside was a book, its paper discolored with age, mustiness rising from inside. She lifted it out and set it down on the table. There was no title. At the bottom was several scrolls.

She took them out and unrolled them. Squinting, she repeated the same Forging Quintess taught her that would reveal any tampering. As she began to read, her eyes widened. After the first paragraph, numbness swept through her body. All she could manage was to stare.

What she was reading had to be a lie. It just had to be.

But the essences revealed to her the truth of it all. The essences might have their own motives, but they never lied. Ever.

She could tell where someone altered the words. The handwriting on the pages were the same as the ones sent to her by her parents, recording their research and the events before their death. Except for the changes. In the scrolls she had hidden away so long ago, the ones that matched half of these, everything pointed to the Dorns.

The originals showed beyond a doubt those who were truly responsible. The Exalted.

Unbridled rage ripped through her, replacing shock. Vision becoming red, she continued to read even as tears trickled down her face at the names associated with the deception. The name responsible for the murder. All these years of lying. She wept, her body wracked with spam after spasm. Not once did she attempt to curtail her grief or her anger, allowing them to suffuse her, clinging to them.

One thing resonated within her. Whenever she saw the woman again, she would kill her.

Over the next month, Irmina spent most of the day and night in the Great Library. As a Raijin, the Custodians allowed her to peruse almost any books she wanted. Some stayed by her side to make sure she did not damage the precious vellum of the old tomes, but they did not deny her access. Each night she returned to her room and compared what she learned to the massive book given to her by Quintess, often until early morning, her eyes an ocean of red from lack of sleep, but still she pressed on. It was astounding how many books and teachings the Tribunal had altered. Each day provided a bigger surprise than the last.

She often wondered how widespread the corruption was beyond what the Devout taught. Were the Colegiums in Cardia carrying the same tainted texts? Had they managed to change the tomes in Castere's libraries? Surely, they couldn't have infiltrated the Svenzar's Stone Vaults.

She arranged for messages between her and Quintess. In order to corroborate much of what she read, she sent for couriers she trusted in her missions for Jerem. They sent back their replies by eagle, written in a cipher. Each translation provided a greater picture of corruption than she imagined. The Tribunal was rotten to its core. Her family's demise had been the least of their atrocities.

The rush of memories concerning the gruesome facts around her parent's death threatened to overwhelm her. The ones in her family deemed to have been able to produce a child with a beasttamer's power had been systematically eradicated. The orders had made it

sound like an inconsequential action, common place, like picking up a spoon to eat soup.

Sitting at a table of some inn she'd chosen for its food, she had to seek the Eye to calm herself. What had been scents that made her mouth water now made her lose her appetite. A harpist played a soothing tune not far from where she sat, her meal a distant memory. She leaned her head back, the conversational murmurs and laughter bringing a deceiving sense of normalcy. The world as she knew it was far from normal.

"Jin Irmina, are you well?" the pale-skinned merchant across from her asked. The man dabbed at his hanging jowls before wiping his mouth.

Not trusting herself to speak, she nodded.

"As I was saying," he picked up a lizard leg and dipped it in sauce, "I don't know how you people have done it, but … one moment …" He popped the leg into his mouth and swallowed. His eyes closed as a smile spread across his face. "Hmmm, that's some good stuff."

Irmina simply waited. Kaffar made her sick, but he was privy to certain information she needed.

"As I was saying, I don't know how you people made it happen, but the Travelshafts have been reopened. A journey that would once take three months now takes less than one. Trade has been phenomenal."

She'd heard the rumors, but could not risk asking directly within the Iluminus. Finding a merchant had been a much simpler solution considering the abundance of trade between the Iluminus, its neighboring city of Coren, and other points within Granadia.

"I wish I had known of this sooner, Kaffar. I have lost out on much."

Kaffar smiled. "You know what they say, 'information means power and riches'."

"Indeed." The man was a chatterbox. All she needed to do was feed him.

"I'm surprised you didn't know. They've been open for months now." He leaned forward as much as his belly would allow. His voice lowered. "I suspect they've been open for a much longer time."

"Why do you say that?" Her tone matched his.

"A merchant of my stature has a few insiders as well as a few rivals. Let's just say some of my competition has been wallowing in riches since last year. I began to wonder how they were making their trips so quickly. Then one of your Ashishin approached me to broker a deal."

Intrigued, Irmina said, "Go on."

"Well," Kaffar was whispering now, "they've done the same all

across Granadia, sending out enough supplies from here to all the major cities in territories they hold. Everything from food, to pack animals, to metal, stone, wood. I even heard rumors of weapon shipments. Gods know I wish I could get a hand in on that. Much of it is concentrated along the southern coast at ports in Ishtar and Calvar."

Irmina frowned, working over the news in her head. Those ports all provided access points to Ostania and those in Ishtar were not that far from Torandil.

"Only one thing causes people to mass supplies like this," Kaffar said. "There's going to be a war. A war bigger than the Remnants."

Irmina didn't let on that she agreed. She also suspected the Travelshafts had been open for a while longer than Kaffar mentioned. She allowed the talk to continue, giving noncommittal replies here or there, promising Kaffar a bigger stake in the trade to line his pockets. A lot of good it would do him. The merchant wouldn't live to see the night through. When she smiled, Kaffar did the same, his grin one of genuine pleasure.

Chapter 38

Galiana left the Stoneman by the upper entrance, finally allowing a deep breath to escape into the night. She stretched her neck from side to side, trying to ease the tightness the mention of High Shin Cantor had caused.

She reached her mind out. Her Matersense drifted freely as she searched for the imbuing she would feel from the dozens of weaponsmiths. As the number increased, she puckered her lips, finally stopping close to one hundred.

Such a massing of Matii creating *divya* had not been done since the Shadowbearer War. Each imbuing carried a distinct pattern in the way the essences formed. No two were identical. Once she located the pattern she sought, she traced its origin, and headed in that direction. After crossing two stone bridges, she stood in front of a scythesmith.

She entered the building, its heat a welcome respite to the cold, the metallic smells quite the opposite when compared to the fresh mountain air outside. After waiting a moment to be certain the smiths in the adjoining work area were completely occupied by their work, she stepped into the next unoccupied room. As she passed, she noted the Imbuer was sitting close to a dual bellows with his back against a wall. She closed the door behind her and sat on a stone bench. She took a second to focus, placed her hand on the wall, Forged a connection with the Forms, and subtly touched her Listener.

“Shin Galiana,” Pupa Danis said, without a hint of surprise. The words weren’t much more than a whisper from the young man imbuing on the other side of the wall.

A gruff voice spoke out. “Did you say something, Blessed Shin?”

“Oh,” Danis said. “Yes, Alda, you can take that break you asked for earlier while I catch up on imbuing the remainder of the metal. On your way back, fetch me some kinai juice from the Stoneman. It’s not too often we come to this part of Granadia, and I do love kinai. Bittan, you may go for tonight, I think I may retire after this batch.” Another, lighter voice spoke briefly in assent before two sets of feet strode from the chamber.

Shin Galiana smiled at the scythesmiths’ enthusiasm for *Shin* Danis. She hoped her old student wouldn’t let it swell his head.

Danis’ voice was wary when he spoke again. “What brings you here, Shin Galiana? I thought you were busy with your endeavors in the north.”

“Those are the very endeavors that led me here, Pupa Danis. How long now until your promotion?” she asked dryly.

A subtle shift followed her question, and she could picture the

man with his head down. “Another year at least, the Assembly has said.”

“Ah,” she replied, making her voice sound enthusiastic, “not so long then until you become an actual Ashishin. What word of Cantor and the Pathfinders?” Sometimes it did well to remind the young of their status.

“They arrived a few weeks after a great storm appeared from nothing. Then they hurried off again. Everyone felt the Forging. I suppose that was you?”

Shin Galiana left the question unanswered. It was good to let some think you accomplished acts beyond your own power. “Do you know which way they headed?”

“Rumor has it that they went searching for the others from Eldanhill. I overheard little, but it also appears they are visiting the Travelshafts.”

“What does Cantor know of the ones he’s searching for, besides me?” she asked.

“I do not know, Shin Galiana. I can only do so much as a Pupa. I do know he isn’t the only High One involved. As widespread as the appearance of shadelings have been, the Assembly has dispatched Pathfinders into several kingdoms.”

Galiana hardened her voice. “Useless information. Things of which I am already aware. Your skill attained you the position close to the Elder Assembly. Seeing your role here now, makes me question if they suspect you. I hope you have not fallen from their good graces.”

“No, no, Shin Galiana. I have still been able to read his reports. Some in the Assembly are suggesting that Raijin Irmina be tried and executed. They speak of treachery.”

Galiana frowned. “Where did the report originate?”

“Eldanhill.”

As she suspected, someone among the Eldanhill Council was under the Tribunal’s thumb. It would have to be so. Only they heard Irmina reveal herself as a Raijin. “Have any reports arrived since the storm?”

A moment of silence passed as the man on the other side of the wall sifted through whatever information he had gathered. “Yes, the last Pathfinder cohort dispatched went to Cahar.”

Ilumni shone on them after all. Cahar was well to the southwest, along the Azimuth Ocean. Her Matii would have evacuated months ago.

Yet, something else bothered her. “Why are there so many Pupae here, Danis? Why has the Tribunal ordered the crafting of so many *divya*? If the situation is so dire, why aren’t there any Ashishin set as guards?”

Danis took a deep breath. “Shin Galiana, the Tribunal has lost Castere. The Assembly ordered as many Pupae here who could imbue as they dared. They dispatched the remainder as well as all full Imbuers to Felan Mark. An army of at least sixty shadebanes recaptured every city we liberated beyond the Vallum.”

Sixty banes meant well over two hundred thousand shadelings and sixty full-fledged daemons. This force would be bigger than that of the Shadowbearer. She somehow managed not to gasp, schooling her face into a mask after the initial shock wore off. What were the chances all this happened the same time Ancel’s ability had emerged?

“Shin Galiana?”

“Ah, yes, Pupa Danis?”

“The Elder Assembly has awoken the zyphyls.”

This time she did gasp. “When?”

“A year ago.”

The only reason to wake the creatures would be to allow passage through the Travelshafts to anyone. It would explain how the Tribunal massed the numbers they had so quickly beyond the Vallum. She calmed herself before she replied. “How are they protecting the zyphyls and the Traveshafts?”

“A Dagodin cohort as well as Ashishin stationed at each entrance.”

“Pathfinders?”

“None, Shin Galiana. They are spread too thin. Between the recent Wraithwood manifestations this side of the Vallum, and protecting the Bastions, as well as those dispatched to the legions, there were none to spare for the Traveshafts.”

Galiana frowned. The numbers were off. All the Matii they’d trained plus what the Iluminus and Calisto provided on their own would be more than enough to manage all points. *Why were they withholding forces?* “Have there been any recent raids on the Travelshafts?”

“Over the last few weeks, yes,” Pupa Danis said. “The Svenzar struck several since the awakening.”

Galiana pondered her choices.

“Shin Galiana, you aren’t planning to use the shaft here are you?”

Pupa Danis had always been smart despite his slow development. She did not answer. “How many Shin did they leave at each shaft?”

“Twenty with each guard squad.”

“Ah. So why haven’t they approached me yet?”

“They had specific instructions from High Shin Cantor not to interfere with anyone accompanied by an Ashishin,” Danis said. “Besides which, many recognized you. Your reputation precedes you, Shin Galiana.”

“Oh? I’m sure many were not pleased.”

Danis gave a low chuckle. “Well, the others have reported whispers since you arrived.”

“About?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

There was no immediate response.

“You may speak freely, Pupa.”

“That you disobeyed direct orders from the Assembly before you disappeared years ago. Some have even suggested that you are,” Danis paused again, obviously troubled, “a traitor”

Anger rose in Galiana, but she squashed it.

“You understand, Shin Galiana, even though I never knew, I still do not think that you … I, I know you are no traitor. But some of the others, because you were High … um, Nerian’s top advisor and-”

“Never mind that. Send word to Calisto to be ready. And inform Jerem we are on our way.” Galiana heard the footsteps of the scythesmith before Danis answered.

“Here is the kinai juice, Blessed Shin,” Alda said.

Severing the link, she left the way she came and returned to the Stoneman, her thoughts swirling all the way there. The Assembly had chosen drastic measures this time it seemed. Still, she needed to discover where they kept the Matii they withheld. With Danis not having discovered any deception by Cantor, then it may well be time for her to trust the High Shin. Jerem relied on him in the past, but she believed in precautions.

She reached the Stoneman amid those thoughts, checking on the young men first. Ancel and Mirza were asleep on two small beds, and Ryne stretched on the floor. Charra lay next to Ancel’s bed, one of his eyes opening lazily and closing after he saw her. Galiana turned to leave.

“Is everything fine?” Ryne’s deep voice rumbled. “Or do I need to wake them?”

She did not show her surprise. “No. Let them rest, and you too. We are leaving before noon. Be sure to restock our supplies.”

She did not wait for him to answer before she left, closing the door behind her. Sleep sang to her as she entered her room.

Chapter 39

Ryne lay on his back watching the sun filter through the curtains. Sleep had eluded him. Thoughts of Ancel kept him awake all night. The young man was more powerful than he could have imagined. His summoning of Etien was the first sign that indeed he might be the Aegis.

He shook his head. All these years, knowing the prophecy was a reflection of a dream from the zyphyls, and yet he had doubted if he would see part of it come to fruition.

Men chased fate and power. He'd watched as they did so, feeding off tidbits planted by those who believed in the Aegis, creating one kingdom after another, destroying one civilization after another. All in the name of destiny. The theory among the Eztezians was that man's unquenchable thirst for power would inevitably lead to the Aegis.

What really was the Aegis? Not even he knew for certain.. Damal had said it was destined to save and destroy the world at the same time, shield and kill the gods. As contradicting as it sounded, he understood. Opposing forces nullifying each other. Harmony.

All had seemed to go well with their plans until other Eztezians succumbed to the Skadwaz who led Amuni's Children. That person tried every possible way to rid the world of anyone who might become the Aegis. The worst part was the inability to put a face or name to the enemy's leader.

Ancel's sword had almost been their undoing. It held power, Etchings to be exact-a requirement to weaken the seals and release Prima-but it was also a locator. One he'd relied on in hopes of finding a person who could wield the weapon when he believed the Dorns were dead. If not for Jenoah Amelie, or Galiana as she now called herself, he would have lost this battle long ago. She created replicas of the weapon through the Imbuers. When the one link to the sword changed into several hundred thousand, spread all across Denestia, he and Sakari stopped searching. Thank the gods for her plan. Otherwise, Ancel would not exist.

A sigh escaped his lips at how close his brethren had come to defeat. The boy's life meant they had a chance, even if it did not nullify the Nine's or Amuni's chances. Better a sliver of hope than none at all.

Seven more Etchings for Ancel to hold the elements. At least if he were meant to possess them all. Three more to complete the Streams. Even now, he felt four of his brothers moving away from them. Somewhere far north, toward the Great Divide. In ways, it made sense. Prima would congregate at the prison, drawn to the Etchings

Forged into the ruins within the Divide-the original Iluminus' ruins.

He abruptly sat up. What better place to wait for the Eztezians? Ancel's release of Prima might not only be for the benefit of those powerful enough to wield it in the Nine's or Amuni's service, but also a trap. But set by whom? Which faction? He tempered the urge to rush off and warn the others. More than anyone else, Ancel needed him to finish his training, but he also needed the other Eztezians. Torn, Ryne couldn't decide if it was worth the risk to try warn them or to help them. To pursue either endeavor required planning and resources that might be beyond him. Better that though than the alternative of Ancel having to travel into the Nether or to Antonjur.

Ryne stood and attempted to gather his thoughts. He felt as if his mind had split into a hundred pieces, and the wind now rattling the window had swept them away. For the second time in recent memory, exhaustion crowded him, and unlike then, he hadn't expended any effort to Forge. He gazed at the beds where Ancel and Mirza slept peacefully. So much rode on the young man's shoulders, and there was no one to carry the weight for him. Ryne knew the feeling. He'd carried the same burden for countless years.

Not wanting to wake them, he picked up his sword belt from the bed and buckled it around his waist. At times like these, he missed Damal and the others. At least there would have been someone to talk to, a person who could relate. Now, all he had was loneliness.

'The life we lead are not ones any sane man would envy. The same way order balances chaos, responsibility balances power.' Damal's words echoed in his head. *Maybe that's why we are destined to go mad, brother. Maybe that's why our brothers are walking into an obvious trap. A chance to end it all after too many years languishing, struggling against the inevitable, against enemies from all sides*. At the door, he paused to look back at Ancel and Mirza once again. They deserved more. The world deserved better.

When he left by the Stoneman's upper entrance, he made his way toward the bridges. The wind swirled, bringing with it a chill and fresh air, while the sun's rays coated the mountains and plateaus in golden swathes, yet its warmth didn't reach the town. The few people on the streets hurried by, bundled up in furs and leathers, heads covered by their hooded cloaks. Those who noticed him gave a wide berth. Several wore leather armor in the Tribunal's familiar crimson.

He stopped at the middle of one of the spans. Mists gathered below him, obscuring the other bridges with its inkiness. The folk traveling along them disappeared in its spirals like fleeting spirits. With the fog, the canyon walls spanned down into a void that appeared endless.

The yawning chasm below reminded him of the years spent mired

in war. One war after the other. Not mere battles but conflicts that sometimes spanned centuries as well as several countries. Kingdoms rose, lived, and died, some to live again, others to remain dead. Great cities lay in ruins, their secrets, their people perishing with them. If he could count the dead, he was certain they numbered in the tens of millions. And even now, there was no end in sight.

The history of his many lives poured forth, and with it came bleakness. The memories settled on him as Nerian, and then Ryne before he regained his stolen consciousness. His heart ached. Someday he would have to kill Ryne Waldron and once again become Thanairen Adelfried. Today wasn't that day.

Footsteps stopped next to him as a gust delivered scented soap. "When I see a man gazing over the edge of a precipice, I often wonder where his thoughts are." Galiana's voice sounded almost as weary as he felt.

"His thoughts ask if it was worth it. All the suffering, the pain, the struggles through the years. If he can manage to see it all to an end."

"What conclusions has such a man come to?"

"He doesn't know yet." Ryne watched as his breath spiraled up from his mouth. "He's done a lot of good and bad. Sometimes he thinks he's done more bad than good. But there's always been a purpose when his actions were his own. Now, he wonders if he is too late. If his years spent hiding, in denial of his power, of his responsibility, cost those he holds dearest. His own people."

"Doesn't his admission of his faults show his humility?"

Ryne sunk into himself. "Maybe, but the people need someone who will stand strong, undaunted in the face of what is to come."

"Thanarien," Galiana's voice grew soft, "you have shown more strength than an army of thousands. Your perseverance has withstood the test of time."

"And yet still I might fail."

"Demand perseverance but first show determination. Demand pride after you show humility. Demand they overcome after you prevail." She repeated each quote with a distinct air of belief. "I am surprised you forgot some of your brother's foremost teachings."

The words sparked memories, and as simple they were, he knew the truth within each. He'd lived *the Disciplines* all his life. "I have not forgotten, but there is only one of me. We face a battle with Ancel still unprepared. In Ilumni's name, the entire world is unprepared. Whenever I receive news, it seems as if our enemies are ten steps ahead of me. My own brothers hate me. Even now, I sense them heading to probable doom. As much as I want to warn them, my duty lies here with him." He faced her. "Have you ever had a wish to be able to split yourself in multiple parts?" She nodded. "Well that is how

I feel right now. I am powerful and yet still powerless."

"Frustrating isn't it?" Despite her long leather cloak, the bottom of Galiana's white dress billowed in the breeze.

"Too much so."

"Tell me," Galiana looked up to meet his gaze, "why would your fellow Eztezians hate you?"

Ryne paused as he considered not answering. Finally, he took a breath. "When we created the Great Divide, it served three purposes. To imprison the shadelings, trap our power within it, and seal the other Eztezians. We agreed that whichever among us was the most lucid would be the one to complete that last task. I was the youngest so it fell to me. Later, as Nerian, under control of Voliny's master, I broke their seals and released our power back into the world before the Shadowbearer War. My weakness is the reason we face what we do. Now, they return to that fount of power, and I'm sure our enemies await them." He'd expected some sense of shock from her.

Instead, the tightness around Galiana's eyes and lips eased into tenderness. "You are so much like your brother. You place the world on your shoulders. A world that the Annendin created pantheons to manage its survival. Yet, you feel you should be able to do what they could not. These aren't humans we face, Thanarien, but netherlings who managed to defeat the gods with their schemes, even if it is only a momentary victory in the scope of time. On the other hand, in the Skadwaz, we face a god's creations who are at least as powerful as you."

"And here I thought your intention was to make me feel better."

Galiana smiled. "I am giving you some perspective that you seem to have lost. It will take a combined effort from all of us, the people included, as well as whatever else we can draw to our side."

And still we may face defeat.

"Things may look impossible, but believing there is a way is better than the alternative."

He sighed. "In many ways I wish the gods would free themselves already, and either declare their retribution or their protection. At the rate events are moving, no path exists where they aren't freed."

"I will tell you honestly," Galiana said, "I never thought there to be any other way. You and I both know some things are beyond the hands of men. We play our part. That is all we can do."

"Hoping it will be enough has become drearier over the centuries. Regardless of what we do now, not much is left besides ashes. Ashes and blood."

"And hope. Remember you mentioned that first. All these years and never once did you give up. So why now? Why when you appear to have one of the most powerful Eztezians since Damal?"

Weariness dragged on Ryne, heavier than the sword at his hip, more persistent than the mists clinging below. “If this were a thousand years ago, and he had time to learn every nuance of his skills, maybe. But as you pointed out, we need everyone. To know four of them may die before the day of reckoning comes leaves much to be desired.”

“If fate had not proved to be nonexistent thing, I would say it was meant to be.” Galiana looked directly into his eyes, her expression solemn. “What if there might be a way to reach your brothers?”

Ryne perked up at the suggestion, but he had an inkling of what she might suggest. “With the presence of the vasumbrals, as well as the Pathfinders, Materialization is a terrible idea. Not to mention that one cannot Materialize from one side of the Vallum to the next.”

“Which is why I did not mention it.”

“Then how?”

“The Elder Assembly woke the zyphyls.”

Ryne made to speak then stopped and began to pace. Mind whirling, he considered the possibilities. He froze in mid-step. “Galiana, when did they wake them?”

“At least a year ago.”

“Who did?”

“My source only said the order came from the Elder Assembly. Why?”

“Did you ever discover how the shadelings managed to breach the Vallum?”

From Galaina’s hiss, he could tell she understood.

“Oh no, oh, oh, no,” she whispered.

Chapter 40

“We should have gone down to the common room.” Mirza took another sip from his mug. All that remained on his plate was a sizable flatbread. “It’s a good way to start the morning, admiring the Stoneman’s girls.”

“I’d expect that from Danvir, not you.” At the room’s large mahogany table, Ancel licked sauce from his fingers, savoring the tangy flavor and scent of boiled eggs mixed with creamy, diced potatoes.

A bone cracked where Charra was worrying at a haunch almost devoid of meat. Golden lances of sunlight shone through the slits in the half-open shutters and space in the curtains, illuminating the marble floors. Wood in the hearth crackled, but the fresh air eased the room’s heat.

“What do you mean?” Mirza asked.

“It isn’t such a smart idea.” Ancel was doing his best to be modest.

Mirza paused with the mug to his lips and glanced at him askance.

“Think on it, as you and Dan like to say. The trackers and Pathfinders were already here. If we go into the common room, it’s likely that someone will put faces to names as Ewald did. All it will take is one eagle, and they’re back here again.”

Mirza offered a half-hearted grumble before he sipped his tea again. The old Mirza would have spoken his mind regardless.

“You know, you’ve been acting strange ever since the Entosis.” Ancel stared directly at his friend hoping Mirza would meet his gaze.

“What makes you say that?” Mirza avoided looking his way.

“We grew up together, Mirz. I know you as well as I know myself.”

“That’s debatable.”

Ancel smiled. The quip was a little of the Mirza he enjoyed being around. “Anyway, as I was saying, you’ve been acting strangely toward me. Every conversation with you feels like I’m pulling teeth. You act as if you can’t joke with me anymore. Some days when I catch you looking at me, it’s as if you’re seeing someone else.”

Silence stretched between them broken by the crunching of bones. The clang of smiths at work and the buzz of a busy town awaking floated upon a breeze that rattled the shutters and whispered its secrets to the curtains whose fabric swished an answer.

Mirza let out a protracted breath, his chest sinking in as he shook his head. Finally, his and Ancel’s eyes made four. “Since the … that

place, I do see someone else."

"I'm me, Mirz, the same Ancel you've always known."

"Are you?"

"Well … yes … just a bit stronger."

A smile creased Mirza's lips. "See, that's another thing. Somewhere since all this happened, you learned to be humble. Just a bit stronger." He shook his head again and made a sound in the back of his throat. "We walked into a place in the middle of winter, and inside, it was summer. There were creatures I have dreamed of and others I never knew existed.

"Ancel, you flung fire and lightning, created shields from the earth, and moved faster than humanly possible. I think the only thing I didn't see you do was shoot lightning out your ass. Although you got trashed most of the times, there was the odd moment or two where you held your own against some giant that taught you. Wait. No. Not just a giant. According to Galiana, the spirit of an Eztezian.

"You summoned a creature I can't begin to describe. Something we would have read about in books or our mothers would have told stories about. And you walk and talk as if it's nothing. So does Ryne and Galiana." He pointed at Ancel's right arm. "You have enough of those now to rival Ryne." His eyes shifted to Charra. "Not even he's normal. So tell me how you expected me to act. Seriously. You know what? Let me ask now, before I lose my nerve. Exactly what in Ilumni's name are you?"

Ancel felt his eyebrows bolt up his forehead. His friend's words were a little more than he'd bargained for. "I'm an Eztezian." For the first time, as if saying the words had some added impact, he believed.

"So you're a god."

"Don't be ridiculous, Mirz, Eztezians aren't gods."

"Might as well be. All things considered though, I'm handling this pretty well. Danvir probably would have bawled like he did back in Randane."

Ancel couldn't help but chuckle. For whatever reason, Mirza appeared more relieved than anything with his admission. "Now that you know, can you please stop acting as if I'm going to eat you?"

"I'd taste disgusting anyway, but I'll think about it."

The crunching of bones stopped. Massive head raised, Charra glanced toward the door before he returned to his meal.

"It's Ryne," Ancel said to Mirza's unspoken question.

As he finished the words, Ryne, with Galiana close on his heels, pushed open the door and entered. His expression was grim. Galiana's face was a reflection of his.

Ancel shoved his plate away. "What is it?"

"Trouble." Galiana shuffled toward the window and pulled the

curtains closed.

Mirza groaned. “Just when I was beginning to relax.”

“We need to leave right away,” Ryne said.

“What about supplies?” Ancel asked.

“No time. The zyphyls are awake.”

“And that means …?”

“This is the second time I heard you mention a zyphyl,” Mirza said. “And we have no clue what they are.”

“You tell them.” Ryne inclined his head toward Galiana. “You two get dressed while she talks.”

Galiana took a seat at the edge of a bed. “During the Shadowbearer War, we faced a crisis. The Travelshafts, which we used for fast transport between all major cities, were not only being raided by the Svenzar, but were used by the shade’s armies as well.”

“Why didn’t you close them?” Mirza was pulling on a new set of wool trousers the serving girl had delivered with the food.

“We did not know how. The Svenzar built them, and they never shared their secrets. So, we had to decide on a solution. Upon construction, one of the original issues with the Travelshafts was that they could not be used to traverse large bodies of water like the sea. It was something to do with the shafts being of the Forms, and therefore in direct opposition to the Flows. Anyway, one of The Custodians within the Iluminus’ Great Library found a solution in one of the Chronicles: a creature balanced between the essences and elements. It was more myth than anything, but so many of the Chronicles proved true, how could we not follow this one?”

“You were desperate,” Mirza said with a snort.

Galiana glared at him. “Several expeditions ventured into Everland’s northernmost wastes as suggested, and there we found the zyphyls by the hundreds. Afterward, we placed one at the doorways to the shafts connecting Felan Mark with Damal’s Landing, making it possible to cross the Sea of Swirls without a ship. We then added more zyphyls to a few cities farther inland in both Ostania and Granadia.

“As the Shadowbearer War progressed, we realized we needed to prevent travel between the continents should Nerian’s armies breach the Vallum. However, the zyphyls were quite volatile and their use had other side effects, which later led us to abandon them. We experimented with putting them to sleep. They still worked as intended. At the same time, we discovered shadelings had used several shafts in cities they captured to cross the Vallum of Light.”

“Wait,” Ancel said, “did the shadelings use the shafts with the zyphyls or without?” The shirt he pulled on fit a little tight, but it was better than the stench of his old clothes.

“Both. But for reasons we still do not understand, they and the

Svenzar could only use those where either we had placed none of the creatures or we had kept them awake. Further research showed sleep triggers something within the creatures to change its balance and prevent the passage of shade. Later, we found the Svenzar fear the zyphyl more when they are dormant."

Ancel felt his heart begin to race with his understanding. "By waking them, someone gave passage to the shade," he whispered.

Mirza had stopped dressing. "Is that how they got into Eldanhill?"

"Yes," Ryne answered, "but that is not all. Although they do not normally interfere with the affairs of men, the Svenzar have no love for the Tribunal. From what we learned, they have once again begun to raid any Travelshaft the Tribunal's Ashishin are using."

"Wait," Ancel said, "you mentioned the Tribunal had abandoned the shafts."

"Until recently, yes. I can only guess it was for one of their plots. I first got word the Svenzar were here last year before you left for Randane," Galiana said. "I wondered why, and now I believe I know. They are not only trying to stop us but also the shade's armies."

"What do we do?" Fully clothed in wool and leathers, Mirza did make for an imposing figure, his flame-colored hair spilling down his shoulders. He strode toward where his scythe leaned on a wall.

"We leave immediately." Galiana stood. "As of right now, there are guards assigned to each Travelshaft. They will be enough of a warning. We must reach Calisto as soon as possible before we head to Torandil."

A low growled issued from Charra. The door burst open. Ancel had his hand on his sword before he realized it was Gebbert, his chest laboring with exertion. Dressed in brigandine the color of blood, with hardened leather spaulders to protect the shoulders and upper arms, vambraces at the forearms, and greaves to match, he looked like a different man.

"Shin Galiana," the innkeeper huffed. "High Shin Cantor is here with his Pathfinders."

Ancel closed his eyes against the rising sense of panic within him. Maybe he should have done as Mirza said and gone to the common room. A last pleasure. Whatever was going to happen, he was convinced none of it would be good. Gebbert's uniform said as much.

"Where is he? Galiana appeared oddly calm.

"At the Travelshaft," Gebbert said. "The others have already assembled."

She looked him up and down, taking in his uniform, and then nodded her approval. "Good. Thank you, Master Gebbert, we shall be along shortly."

The innkeeper bobbed his head several times, turned on his heels,

and left.

"Um …" Eyebrows raised, Mirza pursed his lips. "Shouldn't we be looking to escape somehow?"

"No need. I expected this."

"You expected us to be captured?" Ancel said in disbelief.

Galiana gave that knowing smile of hers. "Who mentioned anything about being captured?"

Relief washed through Ancel before it faded, quickly becoming apprehension. "Wait, you don't expect us to fight them, do you?" It wasn't that he lacked confidence in his new power, but these weren't shadelings they would face. These were Matii with years more experience in Forging, whether in practice or actual battles. He didn't even want to consider the Pathfinders who specialized in hunting other Matii.

"From the look on her face, she's about to say she didn't suggest fighting them either," Mirza said under his breath. "Ashishin," he added with a slow shake of his head and a smirk.

"Don't be presumptuous, Mirza, even if you're right."

Mirza made to speak but Galiana arched an eyebrow. The words remained unspoken.

"So what are we going to do?" Ancel tried his best to squeeze his fear into a tiny knot in his belly. "If they take us, there's no telling what the Tribunal will do. You know as well as I do-" He stopped himself. He had little reason not to trust Galiana's judgment. She hadn't failed them thus far, and she wouldn't now. Whatever happened, she had a solution.

"Good." Galiana smiled confidently as if reading his mind. "Let's pay the High Shin and his Pathfinders a visit, shall we?" As she gestured toward the door, she added, "Do not forget your weapons."

Chapter 41

Uncertainty inched its way into Galiana with each step. After today, she was embarking on a road that might result in the world's end. Well, they had to start somewhere.

Outside the Stoneman, Harval was surprisingly quiet. No smithies claimed the air with their weapon making. The wind swirled, its gusts swishing before becoming howls as it swept by the dark holes for windows in the cliff-face edifices. Each yawned empty and uninviting.

The sun bled gold and red into the sky and its feathery clouds. Colors to match the Dagodin filing across the bridge ahead of them. The town's lower levels were devoid of any other people. Wherever the children lived in Harval, they remained indoors.

She led the way across the bridge and onto a short stretch carved between two buildings. The path was surprisingly empty of snow and slush. It ended at a wall, which became a fifteen-foot wide trail carved into the cliff itself and protected by an overhang that followed its length. In single file the others stretched behind her with Mirza first, then Ancel, Charra, and Ryne.

They traveled several hundred feet up, the town sprawling under them. If not for her knowledge, Galiana would have sworn the formations below were natural and not manmade. The bridges so much matched the ground, it was near impossible to tell them apart. When they gained the summit, a windswept, rock-strewn plateau spread ahead of them. Beyond that, the mountain continued to rise in stone and ice.

Dagodin and Pupae formed ranks on the plateau. Whereas the Dagodin sported their traditional garb, the Pupae wore various colors under their short cloaks and were separated by hue. Cool, diaphanous white, flaming orange, and yellow dominated. Of lesser note were sky blue, brown, robes of a shimmery material, green, and a deep blue that would match the sea. Each color represented an essence. At their head were at least two dozen crimson-garbed Ashishin. She ignored them and focused on the man and soldiers at the formation's center.

In gray robes that only seemed to enhance how broad of back and shoulder he was, High Shin Cantor stood with an imperious air. He had neither cloak nor jacket. Ten bands of color made rings around his long sleeves in stark contrast to the obsidian skin of his pockmarked face. He displayed as much emotion as the silent mountain behind him.

Although High Shin Cantor appeared intimidating, the soldiers arrayed in perfect symmetry behind him could give anyone the chills. Except her. Silver armor reflecting the rising sun, each bore a

sheathed sword at their hip. Whether they were male or female was impossible to tell. They wore full plate helms with a slit in the shape of a T where their eyes and nose would be. Darkness resided in each slit.

"Stay here." Galiana stepped forward. All her life she relied on deception and misdirection in her ploys, from the staff that she no longer used as she feigned weakness, to her taking on the role of a retired Matii of no importance. Not today. Today would be different. A flutter inched through her belly with the thought. She held her head up, kept her back straight, met High Shin Cantor's eyes, and smiled.

She connected with her body heat. Once the warmth spread evenly across her body, she slid the long leather cloak from her shoulders. It fell to the ground that was absent of snow or ice. As to be expected of the roads leading to a Travelshaft, the surface under her feet was solid, smooth, and black, curving down to either side. Her white robes shimmered, sleeves reflecting a living rainbow of color.

A collective gasp issued from everyone in attendance. Almost as one, they bowed from the waist. Some went down on one knee. Even the High Shin and Pathfinders. She basked in the response.

Murmurs rippled through the gathered masses. Galiana picked out the word 'Exalted'. She could imagine the questions running rampant through their minds.

A smile spread across the High Shin's face until his teeth showed. "You are supposed to be dead."

"Am I now?" She returned the smile in kind. Despite who she was or had been, she was glad Cantor did not use her old title of Exalted.

"Very much so." High Shin Cantor gestured with his head toward Ancel and Ryne. "I suppose this is what all the fuss has been about?"

"Partially. I assume you spoke to Jerem?"

"I wouldn't be here otherwise." The pockmarks marring Cantor's face were so deep they often hid the changes in his expression as they did now. "He has arranged for protection by some old friends from the Nevermore Heights."

"Really? And they agreed?"

"He did not give me the details, but they said the sole reason for their presence is that they have a friend of theirs here also."

Galiana frowned. The one person among them who the Svenzar might know would be Ryne. "Have you spoken to them?"

"Yes. Their leader said he will speak only to this friend. Until then, they forbid us the use of the Travelshaft, saying they will guard it against us and any others."

She let out a frustrated sigh. "Well if that is their requirement, we do not have much choice."

Events had been set in motion since the day she sent word to the

Listeners. Cantor's presence meant Jerem had prepared. There was no retreat now. They would garner what support they could from the seeds they'd sown among the Tribunal's councils to see where that led. But the first true sally in a war to the end, a war between gods, netherlings, shadelings and men was soon to begin. Galiana resisted the urge to hug herself.

"Walk with me," she said, striding between and past the Pathfinders. The dark slits within their helms revealed nothing, but she was sure they saw everything. Cantor followed. When she was out of earshot, she asked, "How are things faring at the Iluminus?"

"Not well I'm afraid. The Exalted sent Qunitess and a few others from the Assembly, myself included, and Irmina, after you and your charges. We were about to attempt your capture when something attacked us. We failed. Irmina said she sensed daggerpaws by the hundreds outside the cave we hid inside." He paused. "But I saw Quintess wounds. Neither hers nor my own were from any creature I know. In fact, I am positive it was some kind of Forging used against us. One we were unable to defend against. We lost Neftana, a few Pathfinders, and the trackers."

Galiana's heart skipped a beat. She'd hoped Charra hadn't harmed them. There was no more time for uncertainty or changes to their plans; she needed to know the daggerpaw's true nature. "How is Quintess?"

"Alive but suffering within the Iluminus. There isn't much she can do. She claims to have found some person who can finish our cause there, one the Exalted will not suspect."

Galiana shook her head. After all their planning, so much relied on chance. Quintess always made the best decisions. She could not see the High Jin failing now. "I trust that she will be fine." She glanced over her shoulder to where Mirza and Ancel watched her every move. "You should come meet them. However, be warned, the young Eztezian more than likely fears you and the Pathfinders, while his best friend hates you with a passion."

"Stories about Pathfinders can be moving things, I suppose," Cantor said.

"That's not all. You took the younger one's mother."

"Oh. Have you told them?"

She arched an eyebrow. "How do you keep a secret that big, Cantor?"

"You tell no one," Cantor said with a wry smile.

"Exactly. Now come meet them. They can use some reassurance."

"So you haven't even hinted about what we," Cantor gestured to himself and the Pathfinders behind him with an incredulous expression, "were created for?"

“You get to tell him.” With those words, Galiana turned and headed toward Ancel, knowing Cantor would follow. The clink of armor and thump of boots confirmed it.

Ancel’s eyes grew rounder as they approached. As for Mirza, he glared, eyes seeing through her, lips curling in a snarl. Ryne was expressionless, and Charra simply watched.

When High Shin Cantor stopped before Ancel, he gave a slight bow. The twenty Pathfinders formed a double file ring of shining steel. They placed gauntleted fists to their chests.

“Eztezian Ancel Dorn,” High Cantor said, his voice grave to match his face, “I present to you, your personal guard.”

The young man looked as if he would faint.

Galiana smiled.

Chapter 42

Sitting within sight of the Iluminus and built around the Everlast Mountains' foothills, the city of Coren during the winter was supposed to be a shell of what it was the rest of the year. Whereas spring, summer, and fall meant prepping the vast fields at its outskirts, growing much of the food that not only supplied the Iluminus but also much of Barham, and then delivering the renowned harvests that brought people from all over Granadia, winter meant rest and a lull in visitors. Not at present.

Tucked deep within her cloak, boots slogging through slush, Irmina weaved her way along streets crowded with more than the farmers and folk from the Iluminus who normally patronized Coren at this time of year. Dagodin in boiled leather, armor, or cloth; Ashishin in colors to represent their essences; dark-garbed Raijin; as well as one or two immaculately clad Pathfinders trod purposefully along the cobbled streets. The cold air reeked of unwashed bodies, beasts of burden, and clogged drains. Foot, animal, and wagon traffic added their sonorous drone.

She'd contemplated not coming here, but several notes from High Jin Quintess had set this in motion. After discreet introductions with a few of those on the list, she followed Quintess' suggestion to set up this rendezvous. Time was growing short according to the information provided. The refugees in Eldanhill were due to proceed soon. If she stood any chance at freeing the Eldanhill Council, as well helping those associated with Jerem's cause in the Iluminus, she needed to act. Events were too close to becoming desperate.

Gray, basalt buildings hugged each other, many at least five stories, while others were square or rounded towers. Light glowed from windows. Torches and lamps sprang to life with the encroaching twilight. She'd memorized the map provided by Quintess, and after a few twists and turns down tight lanes and broad walks, she arrived at her goal: a nondescript inn, which appeared to be frequented by mostly farmers. Despite her apprehension, she smiled. In her current garb, she would fit right in with this crowd.

The low tinkle of music filtered from the establishment as she approached. A wispy-haired farmer pushed open the door, glanced back inside, laughed, and then muttered something unintelligible under his breath. He pulled his furs around him and shuffled away. Irmina grabbed the large oak door by the handle before it closed on the warmth from inside. When she entered, the light music grew more pronounced, but laughter and chatter drowned it out. Giana smoke scented the interior in a wavy haze, rising to the ceiling to mingle

with the waft from various dishes.

A pale-skinned serving girl greeted her, gliding across the wooden floor as if it was dry instead of a muddy mess. “Welcome to the Angry Lion. Table or bar?”

“Table.” Irmina rubbed her arms under her cloak. “So cold this year, don’t you think?”

“Not more than any other year. You could go farther east if you wanted to stay warm.” The serving girl said the words without a change in her demeanor.

“East does have more favorable weather.”

“Yes ma’am,” the serving girl answered. “This way to your table.”

Irmina’s anxiety grew, the flutter changing into a clench. The inn’s smoky innards did little to help. She was certain the serving girl had said the correct words, but the woman acted no differently than if Irmina was a usual customer. The daggers hidden at her sleeves and in the folds of her cloak beckoned to her, but she took a calming breath, fighting down the urge to snake a hand closer to one of them. Whatever happened, she would play this one out to the end.

Eyes absorbing every nuance for the slightest change in the patrons at the tables, Irmina followed the serving girl past the bar and into a separate room, this one also filled with people who were smoking, drinking, and eating. Irmina strained her ears for a telltale rasp of steel on leather. There was nothing but the murmur of several dozen conversations, laughter, and the clink of dinnerware and glass.

Tension easing up her spine with each passing moment, she allowed herself a little space from the girl. Without ever looking back, the girl continued forward to a heavy metal door with a curtain across its entrance.

“Here we are.” The serving girl pushed open the door and ushered her in.

Lamps along the walls lit this room brighter than the ones before it. Whatever conversation had been occurring before came to a halt. An eerie silence filled the room as every face turned Irmina’s way. She recognized quite a few from the Iluminus. Every one of them was an Ashishin dressed similar to her in clothing befitting farmers. At the sight of appreciative nods and pleasant expressions, the tightness eased from her body.

“You may leave us now,” Irmina said.

“Yes, ma’am.” The door closed behind the serving girl.

A man with hair the color of silversteel stood. She recognized the face immediately, as well as the flicker within his eyes that matched his hair too perfectly and seemed to change color the way a chunk of glass does when turned at certain angles to reflect light. It reminded her of the fun she and Ancel used to have long ago playing with pieces

of glass, watching the colors change as they spotted it on the side of the Whitewater Inn. The lack of lines around the man's face served to convince her.

"I know what you are." She tried to breathe easy even as her hand trembled and inadvertently crept toward one of her daggers. Whatever she did, her mind told her not to attack him. It would break the pact netherlings made ages ago.

The smile on High Shin Hardan's face stopped her cold. "Good. So does everyone else." His voice was devoid of inflection, vacant as a dead man's sightless gaze.

Confirmation flitted across the sea of faces. She frowned. "But-"

"Sorry that your first encounter with one of us has ruined your thoughts on what we might be." Hardan turned his hands palm upward. "However, like humans, there is good, bad, and indifferent among us."

She'd read much from Quintess' books about netherlings. The more she read, the more she became convinced that most sought to replace the gods with themselves. The tomes had been less clear about the function of others among the creatures. Suffice to say that after her experience with Sakari, she trusted none of them. "Which one of those do you fit into?"

"You could say good."

"How so?"

"Not meaning to answer a question with a question," he said, "but have you ever stopped to wonder why the Pathfinders are what they are?"

She grimaced in confusion. With every Ashishin group, at least one Pathfinder would be somewhere close in case a Matii lost themselves to the madness. They also hunted anyone said to have broken the Principles guarding Mater, specifically using it to do harm to others or break the Tribunal's law. However, over the years, their main purpose had been to find any taken by the madness. What happened to that person afterward was mired in conjecture.

"I see, like many, you have taken the Pathfinders for granted, not even seeing their relationship and effect on the Forgers among you."

Irmina narrowed her eyes, still confused.

"If you were able to go through the annals of all Ashishin who remained constantly under a Pathfinder's protection, you would most likely notice one thing: beyond a doubt those Matii survived more years than any other before they succumbed to the madness."

She felt her eyebrows shoot up at the implication. "Are you saying the Pathfinders were responsible for lessening the essences' effects?"

High Shin Hardan's smug expression spoke on its own, but he still

answered. “Yes. There’s a reason why Pathfinders are required to wear the armor they do and be individually unidentifiable. Among every group of them is at least one netherling. Why? There are those of us, my caste specifically, whose ability it is to lessen the essences’ mental impact.”

“How many were aware of this?”

“Prior to the last several years? Only the Exalted and a few within the Assembly. A secret is no longer a secret if everyone knows.” Hardan smiled. “Besides the awe and fear associated with the Pathfinders served us well.”

Secrets upon secrets wrapped in lies or veiled truths. Irmina couldn’t help the loathing she felt for how much the Iluminus’ hierarchy kept hidden or had changed. So many people’s futures ruined.

A man stood. Irmina squinted as she recognized his face, her mouth opening, and then closing with her shock.

“Raijin Irmina.” Exalted Buneri’s voice carried its customary deep rumble. “He has told you this much to show his goodwill, to reveal truth as Quintess has done. She has been your contact so you know what is happening. Either we start trusting each other or we perish and our loved ones with us.”

Of all the Exalted, Irmina had disliked him the most. When she discovered they were behind her parent’s death, she pictured herself gutting the man. But he had been one of the two among them who had voted against their actions. It did not make her like him, but it gave her a measure of respect for him.

It didn’t help that he was correct. They had all risked this meeting in a city inhabited by Matii, many of whom belonged to the Tribunal. All of them had much to lose and more to gain by their success. Shoving her questions aside, she strode forward to the head of the table and stood next to Hardan and Buneri. She felt inconsequential next to an Exalted and a netherling. None of that mattered now. The one thing of importance was the plan and carrying it out perfectly. Expectant expressions greeted her as she gazed out into the crowd.

“Right,” she began, “you all know who I am. Each of you lead a sect or a division within the Iluminus where you command Matii or soldiers. And each of you are of the Gray Council.” She let that sink in for a moment. “You will have noticed those under you are being recalled to the Iluminus, and then massed here and at the Vallum of Light. The reason given is to strike at the uprisings in Randane and Barson, to quell the advance of the shade, and to retake Castere.

“I believe there’s more to this. Not all of the White and Shadow are at each other’s throats. Someone in the Iluminus, someone of power, wanted the Travelshafts open. Someone wanted the zyphyls

woken so as to release the barrier they held on the shafts. Folly, many of you would agree, as it has allowed the Svenzar to once again raid. I believe the meaning is deeper rooted.

"The real reason was to give the shadelings a way to cross the Vallum without having to breach its power and so they could avoid the Heralds."

Irmina gauged the shocked, outraged, and grave expressions across the room. "But they have also played into our hands. The shafts will be keys in our attack. You each have intimate knowledge of how your sections operate. Knowledge we will use."

Silence ruled as she laid out her plans to escape the Iluminus. In the morning, she would send word via eagle to Torandil. She did not trust the Heralds. Jerem had shown how he could infiltrate the message maps through them. The possibility someone from the Tribunal Assembly did the same was too great a risk to overlook. She hoped her birds reached in time.

Chapter 43

No matter how many times he repeated High Shin Cantor's words, and recounted the ensuing conversation, Ancel still found it hard to believe. The Pathfinders were his personal guard. That was their foremost responsibility. After all the time spent fearing them, Mirza's stories about how they took his mother, praying they did not visit Eldanhill, now he was supposed to believe they were his to command? And yet, no matter how he tried, he couldn't dismiss the claim as ludicrous. The affinity he felt to them spoke all on its own.

If that wasn't enough, when he stepped outside his room, there they would be, standing guard outside his door, at least two of them. In their silversteel armor, its shine ever bright with their full plate helms hiding their faces, even their eyes. His personal guard. *So what am I now? Some kind of king? No. Ryne and Galiana made it clear I have no such titles. What am I then?*

According to them, he was hope.

Hope. It had been good enough to keep him going over the past year. He caressed Mother's pendant. Now, with the advent of his power, he had something beyond hope, something real, physical, a reassurance against possible failure.

"I still can't believe this." Mirza scrubbed a hand through his red hair. He'd been repeating the same words most of the day and into the night. "I'm supposed to think my mother might be alive, but they won't tell me where they took her." He paced across the room's lush carpets, his boots hardly making a sound. "Damned Ashishin."

"I would think you'd be happy," Ancel said.

Mirza stopped pacing, anguish contorting his features. "I am. I mean, I'm excited, overjoyed even, but at the same time, I'm frustrated. Every time I try to question the High Shin, I'm either turned away, or he says," Mirza's voice changed to match Cantor's grim intonation, "'If your mother is alive, it is beyond my power to reveal where she is. That, my son, is the reason we have secrets.'" Mirza shook his head. "I feel like telling him I'm not his damned son, but then what would I gain?"

"Nothing."

"Exactly." Mirza began to pace again, grumbling under his breath. He paused midstep, gray eyes pleading. "You could always try to order them to tell us."

"No," Ancel said. "Not that I haven't considered it, but how would it make me look to them? Obviously, the reason it's still a secret is due to necessity. I know you don't want to hear this, Mirz, but I have an example to set, as do you. Galiana nor Ryne have led us wrong. I'm

willing to follow until they believe it's time for me to take things into my own hands."

"Even though we both know they're hiding things, maybe important ones? Like the fact that Galiana is actually one of the first Exalted? I overheard Ryne questioning her."

Ancel mulled it over. In ways, Mirza's thinking made sense, and it also confirmed his suspicion of their ages. They were thousands of years old, and yet they had not succumbed to the madness that killed most Matii. He glanced at Charra's form and its lack of an aura. He had a theory on that himself, but he needed to see more. After another moment to ponder, he answered Mirza. "Yes. At this point, I trust them both. Look, I'll be honest. There is going to come a time when all I'll be doing is fighting. I can feel it. You are the one friend I have who has stuck by me regardless. You like to act as if it's all fun and games, but I know you take the future as seriously as I do. I've seen you go from Mr.Wild-and-Carefree to what you are now." Ancel gestured to Mirza's uniform. "I don't think I'm cut from the right cloth to lead the Setian when the time comes. Attack and defense are my strong suit. Yours is thinking, planning. I'll need that from you."

"Even after what I did, not telling you about Galiana's orders in Randane?"

"I can't say I wouldn't have done the same myself. Ashishin can be quite persuasive. Her? Doubly so."

Mirza let out an audible sigh, his posture relaxing. "Thank you for that. We haven't talked about it since, and-"

Ancel held up his hand. "If not for you, I wouldn't have met Kachien. If not for Kachien, I, no, we would be imprisoned or dead. I don't know about you, but I'd take where we are now over those choices."

Mirza grinned like the old Mirza, all innocence that said he was up to no good. "Speaking of Kachien, what do you plan to do about her and Irmina?"

"Nothing." Ancel suppressed the need to think about either woman. "Kachien doesn't care what I do one way or the other. I have a feeling she's happy with me. Plus, she still doesn't seem to think she belongs among us, although she's more connected to who we really are than she ever thought. My first goal is making sure everyone is safe in Torandil, then I have a good idea of where Galiana intends to take us next."

"Seti," Mirza said with a shrug. "Seems the obvious place. We announced our independence from the Tribunal, and we again partnered with the Dosteri, who according to all accounts are descendants of the Erastonians. The same Erastonians your father once relied on in an attempt to stop Nerian. Anywhere in Granadia

certainly isn't safe from the Tribunal's reach. So what better place to go than home."

"Precisely. There's something else too. Another reason I haven't bothered to ask after your mother's whereabouts."

Mirza instantly perked up.

"I believe I know where she is. Where they are."

"Huh? Who's they?"

Ancel smiled. "I'll give you a moment to think."

Mirza paced back and forth faster than before.

"You're making me dizzy."

He stopped and scowled before continuing to pace.

Ancel took a seat on the edge of the bed and waited.

A moment later, Mirza faced him, incredulity written across his face. "All these Matii who the Pathfinders have been capturing for years, that's the 'they' you're referring to. At any other time it would have seemed far-fetched, but it isn't any more unbelievable than the Pathfinders being your personal guards. It actually makes sense. To fight this war, for Seti to have a chance, Galiana and the others would need an army. *You* would need an army. What better than to amass people who everyone thinks are dead?"

Admiration shone in Mirza's eyes. "The same reasons no one ventures into Seti, into the old dead capital of Benez itself, is exactly why it makes a good place to hide not only them, but to take all the refugees. All the stories of Seti being infested with creatures descended from the old wars was just to keep people out." He shook his head. "Only the gods knows how many years they've been about this."

"With an army that formidable, we might stand a chance," Ancel said.

"We'll need it too. The other Ostanian kingdoms won't take our return lying down."

"No, they won't, which worries me. Between the Tribunal's forces already near Seti's borders, the Vallum of Light, the shadelings, as well as the other Ostanian kingdoms, our chances still appear a bit daunting."

"A bit?" Mirza snorted. "Never mind. I guess you can say a bit when you're an Eztezian and so is your teacher."

"Think good thoughts, Mirz. We came this far, didn't we?"

"True. It's just that those are a lot of enemies, not counting the rumor of the Kassite's seals breaking."

Ancel tensed. He'd held this back from his friend for so long. "Where did you hear that?"

"When I was in the common room before coming upstairs. I needed a drink," Mirza explained.

“Well, it’s true.”

Mirza’s brows seemed as if they would shoot off his forehead past his shock of red hair. “You’re lying.” When Ancel simply stared at him, he continued, “How, How do you know this?”

“Apparently in order to release my power, it involved shattering a ward.”

“Wait,” recognition flitted across Mirza’s features, “you don’t mean when you activated the Chainin, do you?”

“Yes.” Ancel waited for the outburst, but none came.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Mirza said quietly.

“Until the Entosis, I had my doubts about what I did. Besides, what was I supposed to say?”

“Hey, Mirz, by the way, I broke one of the Kassite’s wards and soon the gods will use its weakness to bring chaos to our world.” Mirza shrugged. “Seems simple enough to me.”

Ancel grinned. “Now, even you don’t believe that. You would have thought me mad.”

“Probably. So what do you plan to do?”

Mirza was taking the revelation remarkably well, which was another reason Ancel was glad his friend had stayed. Under pressure, Mirza always seemed to be at his best.

“Nothing I can do about that for now,” Ancel said. “We’ll have enough problems once we reach Seti. Until then, I’m dealing with each situation as it arises. First, we see our people safe.”

Not a single obstacle existed that would stop him from completing his father’s wish.

Chapter 44

If Ryne's eyes weren't deceiving him, and he had no reason to believe they were, Halvor had grown bigger. Much bigger. Whereas before the Svenzar stood three times Ryne's height, the size of a house, now, he was double that. Each shoulder could hold two wagons. If the smiling pits of his eyes and mouth weren't open, he could easily have been mistaken for a part of the mountain behind him, except he lacked the sprinkling of snow and ice. Another Svenzar named Kendin accompanied Halvor. With them they had two score Sven, each one at least matching Ryne's eight feet, they too as much earth and stone as the Red Ridge Mountains. As often happened when Svenzar were near, the air smelled of wet earth after a rainstorm.

Since his days as a mere Sven, Halvor had been more than a little testy and inquisitive. Now, as a leader, a master among his kind, he carried a dignified air, a sense of being that encompassed his surroundings.

The enormous silver sphere ahead of them was the only thing more distracting than the Svenzar. It was the awakened zyphyl. Larger than even Halvor, the featureless sphere writhed and contorted, a wriggling worm that hid the yawning expanse of the Travelshaft's recesses. Ryne cringed at the nightmares using the creature would bring.

"Hail, Guardian Ryne Waldron." Halvor's eyes smiled to match his widening mouth. His voice was the same musical cadence Ryne remembered, the words more notes than speech. It tinkled like the expertly plucked strings of a master takuatin player. One could become lost in such music, steered by the Svenzar to elicit emotions and reactions.

"Hail Halvor. Why not use my true name?"

"I did. Guardian is what and who you are, not what name you choose to bestow upon yourself."

Ryne nodded.

"I am pleased to see you are in possession of your own mind once more," Halvor said.

"As do I." Ryne nodded to where Galiana stood a ways back with Cantor. "She told me you are here because of me."

"Well, yes, but for more than only you."

"Oh?"

"The shade cannot be allowed to use the shafts."

This, Ryne already knew. The Travelshafts offered access to the Svenzar's city of Stone deep within the Nevermore Heights. The fount of Svenzar power. "I told her the same thing, that you're here to

protect your own interests."

"We also wanted to see your ward to safety, or relative safety. He has to be there to finish what he has begun." The mirth fled Halvor's expression.

"And you doubted I will be able to see him to it?"

"No. I for one have never doubted you, nor has my father, King Kalvor, but events conspire to move quickly, fast even for you humans. Your presence is needed somewhere else, but at the same time you must fulfill your obligation to your ward."

Ryne had a sinking suspicion that he knew exactly what Halvor meant. The Svenzar had a way of seeing things, knowing what was happening in the world that he could not account for. "Where might I be needed," he asked anyway.

"This is no time to play the game of knowledge." Bass filled Halvor's notes.

Taken aback by the grim response and tone, Ryne frowned. The few times the Svenzar became this serious, the repercussions touched the world's farthest reaches, and in ways not even the true Chroniclers, the ones who claimed to see the Planes of Existence, could predict.

"You mean my brothers." Ryne allowed his mind to touch the pinpoints, the bonds that told him of their locations. The four wayward ones from earlier, the same he'd felt the day he woke in Galiana's hospice still headed for the Great Divide. "Unfortunately, I cannot be two places at once."

"This is true, but it does not change the need. You must go to them."

The Svenzar were hardly ever direct. They enjoyed their puzzles, their riddles, even if they claimed they did not play and tried to appear serious despite the perpetual smile ingrained into their features. Seeing Halvor like this, coupled with his grim expression, made the hairs on Ryne's arm stand on end. Whatever was happening, he hoped it was not as bad as Halvor was suggesting.

"Prima Materium has massed near the Great Divide since my ward released it, and they're drawn to its call," Ryne sai. "That's to be expected. I suspect there's an army of shade, Amuni's Children, and possibly one Skadwaz waiting, but I doubt even they could stop four Eztezians working together." Ryne opened his mouth to continue then snapped it shut. He let his words out slowly. "Which one of the four is a traitor?"

"Not one. Two. The Guardians for air and water."

"The Flows," Ryne whispered.

"And the other two?"

"Cold and metal."

There it was. One of the Svenzar's own had gone to defend.

"There is more," Halvor said. "The one you fought beyond the Vallum, near Edsel Stonewilled's people. He is there."

"Voliny's dead." Ryne refused to call the man by his other name for fear of the memories it would dredge up.

"That was not Voliny."

"What?"

"In your haste to save the boy and to forget, you have allowed some things to slip by you. Among the second generation of Eztezians, there was none stronger than you. Even most of the first paled in comparison. While under the shade's control, you were no less an Eztezian. If you think it was Voliny, how is it that he bested you that night? Yet, when you fought him in Castere, you defeated him rather easily."

Ryne left the obvious answer unspoken. "Who was it then?"

"Voliny's master, a boy you knew as Kahkon."

Memories of Carnas tore through Ryne. They scoured him, threatened to wash him away. All in scarlet, bone, and bristle. The black of soot. The gray of ash. The unrecognizable mess left after a daemon ripped out a person's sela for deliverance into the Nether. He relived the mounds of dead. Men, women, children. Every face belonged to a friend. Kahkon danced atop their corpses.

Kahkon, the boy he'd taught. The boy who he felt could have been his son. The boy who was ever inquisitive, having him tell stories of the gods, read him myths and legends. The boy the shade took. The boy he had failed to save.

So many deceptions. This one greater than most.

"He used my teaching to see if I would remember my past," Ryne said, his voice sounding hoarse and far away.

"Indeed," Halvor rumbled. "Now he waits for the rest of you. Two of them are his already. Either the other two will fall or they will be his. That cannot be allowed. If he succeeds, he will capture the Sanctums of Shelter."

Ryne's mind snapped from the red haze of old grief and new rage. The Sanctums of Shelter held the power of the Vallum and fueled the Great Divide. They were a balancing act between neutrality, order, and chaos. Tip the scales one way or the other and it would break the first Principle of Mater. *The elements of Mater must exist in harmony.*

Nothing he, Galiana, or any of the others had planned could save what was left then.

"I must go to them now," Ryne declared, desperation a storm in his chest.

"If you do, you will lose your ward."

The effect would be the same. A sense of helplessness suffused

Ryne. He leaned his head back, closing his eyes in prayer. He prayed harder, in earnest. No one answered what choice he should make.

"It is why I am here," Halvor said. "It is Humelen's will. We will see you to Torandil, and then to Seti through the Travelshafts. It will grant you enough time to see your ward safe and meet the others at the Great Divide."

The despair in Ryne lifted a little, just enough for him to offer Halvor a weak smile and a nod of gratitude.

Chapter 45

Although his Pathfinder escort marched near him, Ancel couldn't help touching his sword's hilt. He swore the gigantic stone creatures intended to eat him. The books mentioned the Svenzar and Sven being large, but for some reason he had not equated their size to match what he saw. Halvor and Kendin, their leaders, stood half as tall as the canyon they walked through, shoulders almost touching the icy crags rising on both sides. A thick odor of fresh earth accompanied the creatures. The Sven kept to the front, but that mattered little as their musical speech echoed above the footsteps and clink of armor carried not only by the space but also by the occasional chilly breeze. It was as if a band accompanied them, notes rising and falling, a rhythmic chime unlike the murmur of Harval's Matii who followed behind in organized ranks.

Striding next to him, Mirza gawked so much that he tripped more than once. Charra acted as if the creatures did not exist. What Ancel found almost as fascinating was Ryne's ability to speak their language. Etchings glistening in the sunlight, Ryne walked next to Halvor, both engaged in conversation.

Ancel was still staring at the Svenzar as they rounded a corner. All thought of them fled his mind.

In liquid, translucent silver, the zyphyl loomed before him. Beyond it yawned the Travelshaft's blackness.

"Remember," Galiana said from next to him, "it is of the Streams, as are you. Bottle your fear. Give it nothing to feed on when you enter or else you may not return from its grasp. It will tempt you. You will see visions of things that may have happened or those to come; the possibilities created by choice. You must ignore it all. Set your mind on coming through. Take a moment to clear your heads and set your thoughts on reaching the other side. Nothing it shows you is real."

"Whatever you do, whatever you see," Ryne said, "do not Forge. The zyphyl are the opposite of the vasumbrals. Instead of devouring Mater, they can multiply what you do a hundred fold. That is never good when inside. Everland still suffers from what an Eztezian unleashed within a zyphyl."

Ancel swallowed.

"So go in and don't think," Mirza said. "Not as easy as it sounds."

"Regardless," Galiana indicated the Travelshaft with a dip of her head, "this is the only way to avoid whatever traps the Tribunal has in store."

Galiana hadn't been pleased when Ryne mentioned they would be skipping Calisto, but somehow their discussion resulted in her

acquiescence. Whatever caused her to change her plans, Ancel figured it had to be important. He wondered what else they were hiding from him.

"I've faced shadelings, seen a netherling, trained with an Eztezian, have a god's Battleguard as my own construct, Pathfinder's as my personal guard, and I, myself, am an Eztezian." Ancel shrugged. "What's there for me to be afraid of?"

"Oh, nothing but gods and godlings," Mirza paused, tapping a finger on his lip, and then pointed as if remembering something, "and monsters looking to eat our world. That's all." He threw up his hands in exasperation.

"Enough," Galiana said. "Just remember our instructions."

Both he and Mirza nodded, but Ancel still could not help the little flutters in his gut. "What's that?" He pointed to a charcoal surface wide enough to hold three wagons that led down to the shaft's entrance. Not a hint of snow or ice gathered on it.

"The Svenzar say it's a road, but unlike any other," Galiana said. "It increases your speed, and then that determines how fast your group will travel."

Ancel could not begin to imagine what speed would take them to Torandil in a day with the Svenzar's aid. The journey normally lasted two months or even longer with the winter storms.

"Imagine the shaft being like Materialization," Galiana offered as if reading his confusion. "It's a portal, but unlike Materializing, there is a physical distance between the two places that must be crossed. Similar to the Entosis, the shafts alters the passage of your time and movement when inside. However, unlike the Entosis, the Svenzar are able to increase or decrease the effect."

Ancel couldn't fathom the entire concept, but with all that he'd experienced, who was he to question the possibilities? He took a deep breath, inhaling crisp, cold air, and then nodded.

Within moments, they arrived at the edge of the charcoal road. High Shin Cantor called for a halt.

Halvor continued walking, leaving his counterparts behind until he stood alone upon the road. His body changed to the match its color, a deep black, and then like a mound of snow on a blistering day, his body began to melt, becoming one with the roadway. Although Ancel watched, he still found it difficult to believe what he was seeing. A moment more and the creature vanished.

Concerned murmurs abounded except from the Sven. An eerie silence accompanied them.

"Forward," Cantor shouted. "Everyone onto the road."

"What just happened," Ancel asked of Ryne.

"Halvor has negated the effect of the road to ensure we are all

together."

"What happens when the effect returns?"

"Falling into a bottomless hole is the best way to describe it."

Ancel was glad he hadn't eaten much that afternoon. The way his stomach was clenching and unclenching, he would have probably spewed its contents. He glanced back to see the last of the Matii step onto the road.

"Everyone," High Cantor called, "Nothing you see is real. Tell yourself that as many times as you need to."

Waiting for further instructions, Ancel frowned when the man said nothing more. "What about the warning not to Forge," he whispered.

"No need to mention it," Ryne answered. "Of the people here, only you, the High Shin, and I could manage it once inside the zyphyl."

"Brace yourself!" Cantor bellowed.

Ancel stiffened, squeezing every body part tight; his arms, fists, legs, neck, back, stomach, and still they were not enough. When he shot forward, his stomach leapt into his mouth. One moment, he was standing with Ryne, surrounded by Harval's people and his Pathfinders, and the next he was touching the zyphyl's surface, the Travelshaft a black maw. That one moment in between felt as if his body would tear itself apart.

He struck the zyphyl and stopped.

There was no sense of motion as he floated in the air. He was alone among a profound absence of light, absence of anything. The emptiness, almost tangible, begged him to reach out to it. His eyes were open, yet he saw nothing and smelled nothing.

The void stirred. It caressed him; its breath whispered along his skin. Abstract thoughts drifted aimlessly letting him know that within it, he still existed. So did the hammering of his heart.

Thump, thump thump, thump, thump thump. Faster and faster it beat. It was almost as if he held his heart next to his ear, its vibrations rippling through him, its rhythm thunder in his ears.

Bright pinpricks appeared all around him, thousands on thousands of them. They kept forming until they were a greater number than his mind could fathom. He noticed then that *he* moved and not they. It felt at first as if he drifted toward those lights, but as he drew closer, he saw that his speed defied all reason. With the realization, his body cried out from the rush, the jolt vibrating through his soul, stomach knotting as if he fell into a void. His mind cried tears that refused to leave his eyes. The lights grew from sparks into blinding white globes, and then into one continuous blurred line.

He stopped abruptly.

Ahead of him was a huge orb of blues, whites, greens, and browns, surrounded by deep, dark, emptiness populated by pinpricks. Slowly, familiarity came to him. Ancel recognized what it reminded him of: the nights when he would marvel at the moons traversing the night skies accompanied by stars.

He was looking upon a world from the outside looking in. Excited and scared all at once, his mouth opened. There was no one for his unasked question. No cold or heat suffused him, yet he shivered. He drifted down to the world's surface, and as he did so, two moons circled it. In moments, he passed beyond them and into the pearly whites of clouds. They hung there, puffs of white smoke in different shapes and sizes suspended by nothing. The sun's glow limned them in flaming hues, and for the first time, he felt its warmth. As he ventured below the clouds, he recognized where he was as compared to the many maps he'd seen.

Denestia.

He floated somewhere above Ostania.

With the thought, he zipped down toward a city, its buildings growing from tiny structures into towering edifices as they climbed the side of a mountain. A gigantic castle loomed below. He cried out when his speed did not slow. By reflex, he threw his hands up over his face as if they would protect him from crashing through brick and mortar. But when he struck, there was no impact; he passed through the walls as if they were air and appeared floating above a throne room.

Rot immediately assaulted his nostrils. He swept his gaze across the room. Several shadelings and a thin, reedy man in uniform held a woman captive, her clothes rags, her face a battered mask. Across from them, a younger uniformed man faced the king. The young soldier, he guessed a General of some sort, pointed at the king who wore black armor of interlocking plates. Behind the king, a boy and a girl, expressions filled with fear, huddled beside a man wreathed in black.

Ancel frowned, drawn to the soldier's stance, to his hair, then to the woman and back again. His mouth fell open of its own volition.

Mother?

Da?

That would mean the king was Nerian. There was something else familiar about the Shadowbearer that he couldn't quite place.

The children had to be his brother and sister. Anton and Celina.

Before Ancel could move, the world screamed. Svenzar and Sven tore a chasm in the floor. Materforging scoured the room.

The man wreathed in black near his siblings now held a sword, its blade dripping blood.

His father screamed.

Something whisked Ancel away.

He reappeared above a great tower. A Bastion, he knew at once. Soldiers massed in a field. On the battlements, his father cried while holding his mother. Galiana stood behind them.

Again, he was taken away.

He touched the ground in a field surrounded by familiar woods with the scents of home. The Greenleaf. In the distance, he saw the winery. Mother and Father tended the kinai. A howl broke the day's silence, rolling across the plains. From the forest bounded several wraithwolves in long, loping strides. Ancel screamed and began running toward his parents but he knew he would be too late.

"I can give you the power you need." A voice oozed into his mind.

He stopped in his tracks.

"The shade can sway these creatures. It is yours to command if you so wish it," said another voice.

Gaiana's face swam into his vision. "Remember nothing you see is real."

"This isn't real." He yelled.

"Maybe it is or maybe it is not," the first voice cooed. "All exists within the Planes of Existence. Every possibility. Will you let them die?"

Ancel's hands trembled as he squeezed them into fists. Tears trickled down his face and he watched in horror as the shadelings drew close enough to pounce on his parents. He wanted to stop them. He had to stop them.

Inside him, his power burned. *Dear Ilumni, help them*, he prayed.

The voice screeched.

Charra appeared, slamming into a wraithwolf. The others of the pack stopped and turned toward the new threat. His power forgotten, Ancel ran for his parents. The voice cackled in his head.

Again, something snatched him away.

"Bring them back!" he cried hoarsely.

A hollow boom sounded. Ancel snapped his head around.

Smoke billowed from the winery. Char choked the air. One of the walls blew outward. From the debris strode a man swathed in all black. He dragged Mother's limp form from the building by one arm.

Power surged into Ancel's Etchings. He would not allow the man to take Mother again.

Yet, as much as he wanted to, craved to lash out, to release Etien, he did not.

Once more, whatever power controlled what he was seeing took him and deposited him elsewhere.

In silver armor, sword raised above him, he stood in a familiar city.

Jenoah.

The poisoned gods' attack swept across the world. Not only here in Hydae, but in Denestia also. It was all connected. With one sacrifice, he could save Denestia, even if it meant the evil infecting Hydae, the darkness thrust upon it by Amuni, would still live.

He needed to give of himself.

The Etchings on his weapon and his body joined as one. He called on Prima.

Antonjur.

Power arched across the Planes into the Entosis, black and light at the same time as if a lightning strike marred his vision. It originated from the mountains hidden in the distance where Prima Materium coalesced, fed by the creatures that inhabited it. Something about the darkness in the elements was terribly familiar. But it was nothing that scared him. He embraced what Charra gave him.

The gods' power struck.

Whisk.

Ancel leaped up onto the highest tower in Randane. Below him, the city churned in flames, ashes, and blood.

The ashes of my people. The blood of my people.

In the main square before the temples dedicated to the gods of Streams, and at the steps leading into the king's castle, shadelings had Eldanhill's refugees lined up. Eyes aglow, daemons flicked out strands from their heads while walking on spindly legs like giant insects. The black hair, or whatever it was, ripped into the prisoners. People Ancel knew. Many he considered friends. Some who were family. His people. Those he'd sworn to help protect.

Sela flew from each person as they died.

The daemons screamed. All across the city came matching replies.

A portal twisted open. Some sela flew into it, while the remainder zipped into the dead and living alike. Those alive grew in size and power. The dead, shifted, got to their feet.

Shadelings. Every one of them.

Whisk.

He heard a roar. Through his helm's visor he saw wave upon wave of shadelings charging across a rolling plain to him. Wraithwolves, darkwraiths, daemons, vasumbrals, other creatures, skittering like spiders, some appearing as if risen from the grave. Their fetid stench reached him even where he stood. He could make out the sweat, spit, and other bodily fluids as they came, worked into a fervor in their bloodlust.

Behind him, he heard a bellowing reply. To his left, Mirza stood,

scythe spinning in his hand, Mater glowing from it. Behind him were rank upon rank of soldiers, faces grim against the tidal wave of flesh, fangs, claws, and steel. To his right was Irmina. Daggerpaws by the thousands spread near her along with scores of mountain men. Overhead, eagles wheeled and cried.

She raised one hand. Sparks appeared in the air. Each grew into living, silver, translucent ovals.

Ignoring the onrushing shadelings, he turned to his army. Too many battle standards to count flapped in the breeze. He knew them all. The most prominent represented each type of Matus still residing in Denestia. The Lightstorm, the Waterwall, the Guardian Wall, the Quaking Forest, the Stone, the Searing Fist, the Thirty-two Winds, the Icebound, the Black Halls.

He watched himself as he raised his fist.

Warriors in cloth, skin a deep bronze, stepped forward from the phalanxes. Faces a mask of calm, each one bore a massive two-handed mace slung over their backs. They strode to the front of his army. Muscles bulged in their arms as in unison they freed their weapons from their harnesses and swung.

The earth roiled with the impacts. It rose, a living creature in a massive swath of rubble, dirt, and blocks of stone that tore apart the enemies vanguard.

As sudden as it heaved, the earth subsided, calm and flat as if it had not just raged. To the front of the horde stood a man in black armor, hand on the hilt of a greatsword that punctured the starving ground.

He motioned to Ancel. “Come!” he shouted.

Ancel smiled. If in death he could help save his people, he would gladly give of himself.

Whisk.

Nine netherlings came forward, one by one, to bestow an Etching upon him. With each gift, his power continued to grow. War after war followed, with him leading the Setian to victory. Their enemies lay decimated before them. On the day he gained his last Etching, he broke the last seal on the Kassite.

The gods returned to the world swathed in destruction. The nine netherlings stood before them, matching their strength.

The gods fell.

The world burned.

Whisk.

Irmina sat on the ground in front of the brown, rusted gates. Shadows capered all around her. Tendrils caressed her and the man she cradled in her arms. Tears streamed down her face.

“I cannot save you, my love. I cannot even save myself.” She

wailed.

Ancel looked up into her eyes, red rimmed with grief. A cough wracked his body as he squeezed her hand feebly. Life leeching from his body, he was drifting away. He tried to savor the scent of bellflowers from her underneath the sweat, but the only whiff he caught was of death. “Do it,” he whispered.

Sobbing, she lifted him and stumbled to a stone altar before the rusted gates. No, not rust, but brown, mottled, rotted flesh. She laid him on the altar.

A disheveled figure in tattered clothing shuffled over to him. The figure placed a tome by his head.

“Give in and he shall save you. The shade is his to command and so shall it be yours. Beg him, praise him,” a disembodied raspy voice said from the hungry shadows that licked out all around them.

Thoughts of his friends dying, of his parents, and of a world destroyed assailed his senses.

“Give in, and all shall be well again.”

He wanted revenge. Someone would have to pay for the suffering him and his people endured which now clouded his senses. A voice whispered that it was not real to him. A familiar voice but he ignored it. He was in too much pain and seeing Irmina suffer crushed his heart. The images of destruction stood etched into his skin, seared his being. Below him, Irmina knelt, head bowed, waiting patiently.

Etched into my skin. He attempted to draw on his Etchings. Nothing happened. He no longer had them. He didn’t think he ever had them.

No. This wasn’t right. He rolled off the altar.

The creature that was Irmina stood. “Almost,” it whispered, death’s stink even stronger now.

Whisk.

Faster and faster the visions came. Futures and pasts. Wars and rumors of wars. Lands and names changed. Friends and family dying. From each he garnered information. A lie here. A truth there. A picture formed. A mosaic to rival any ever created. In the center of it all, he remained, resolute and steadfast. He did not know where they originated, but at every turn temptations reached out to him. At every turn, he defied them. The visions built to a blinding crescendo, blurring into one.

Whisk.

Whisk.

Whisk.

He would not give in, no matter what he witnessed. Perseverance in the face of his doubts. Strength to conquer any weakness. He would prevail.

“Finally,” a voice unimaginably smooth and cold said, “finally, the Aegis’ last piece.”

Ancel opened his eyes.

The silver of the zyphyl extended itself to him. A huge bulbous form pushed out from the center of the silver mass. A single eye opened like dancing flames. It spoke.

“A cycle passes in the Planes of If,
A curse and a gift, the creator’s bane walks the land,
Stretching through time, he reaches his hand,
For any who can right the seeds gone wrong,
Streams of light singing a dark song,
Forms of the land open a path,
Flows fill an empty void,
Finally together as one the three who they dread,
Two thought dead, one willfully misled,
Heralding the end of the era when gods lay slain
Materium wielded and waste lain
Resurrection lies within both life and death,
The time when all breathes a last breath
The world battered to a dying husk,
All in the name of the Nine’s lust,
Yet hope dwells within the Entosis,
Guarded and kept by the blood of the Aegis
Through destiny’s doors
And from within a temple’s floors
It begins and ends with Etchings.”

“What … what are you,” Ancel managed.

“Ah,” the zyphyl said. Ancel could imagine the thing smiling. “One who asks the right questions.” The eye turned. “I am but one who stands between many worlds, a keeper of time, a bringer of dreams,”

“Nightmares are more like it,” Ancel said dryly.

“Yours are more volatile than most, but so … so …,” the eye turned, “fulfilling.”

“Why me? Why show me the things you did?”

“It is in your blood. You, more than most others, have manifested a power deep within what makes you. Eztezian. Netherling. ‘Tis a coupling not seen before. One thought not possible.”

“Are you saying my parents aren’t Stefan and Thania?”

The eye shifted, rotating right to left. “Of course, they are.”

“But you said … Never mind. What you showed me. Was it real? Was it true?”

“It is all real, all relevant. Maybe not to your time and place but in another. It is all choice. You chose well.”

“You said I’m the last part of the Aegis. What is it?”

The eye did a full rotation. “A concept, a power, an idea, a shield, a person, many persons, you, your brother, your sister, Irmina, your mother, your father, the gods, the world.”

Confused, Ancel frowned.

“Man must have faith. A belief. You have it in you. Many have preyed on that weakness. Man must have power. They crave it. The sentient creatures of all the worlds crave power. There are those who will upset balance for such. The gods have forgotten that which they were created to do. This world leans toward chaos. When the Annendin returns to reclaim the gods, he will see their failure. The world will be scoured. But man must have faith. You have it in you. So do many others.”

“Faith in the gods? In the Annendin?”

“In yourself. Follow the paths you believe are true. The answers will come.”

“Will I find the ones to save the world?”

“This world as you know it is doomed.”

“So what’s the point?”

“The world is so much more than the land, Ancel.”

Ancel stopped, his mind searching for answers. “It’s the people.”

“Ah.”

“Can I save them?”

“No one person can do so. There is no one savior. Yet-”

“Man must have faith.” Ancel understood now. “I must give it to them. Hope. Hope is what they require.”

“As the world must have harmony. I gave you the keys. Follow the path.”

Hands dragged at Ancel before he could ask another question. Cold to the touch, a substance covered his body and face. When his head came free, he saw Ryne and Galiana pulling him away from the zyphyl’s silvery embrace.

He didn’t remember much of the dreams he had inside, but the conversation was as clear as the blue skies above until darkness folded him in its grasp.

Chapter 46

Galiana sat in a lavishly furnished room provided by King Tozian, Torandil's ruler, at her request. The room smelled of whatever flowery musk the Dosteri used to freshen their carpets. She studied Ancel's prone form. She'd fed him kinai. All she could do now was wait. Almost a full day inside the Travelshaft had equated to a week in time on the outside, and a distance covered that would have taken two months. If not for what happened with Ancel it would have taken a day on the outside. Still, what should have been impossible, Halvor had made probable by refining the balance between the zyphyl and the Forms. But at what cost?

She'd never seen a zyphyl physically latch onto someone. People lost themselves to the visions long before they made it to the exit. To have one of the creatures try to hold onto Ancel was more than troubling. It was frightening. What had it shown him?

Ever since the occurrence, Ryne had become more agitated. He and Mirza waited outside the room with Ancel's Pathfinders. Charra would have none of it, insisting to be close to his master. She still regretted not being able to question Ancel about the beast. But so far, Charra posed no threat, and its intentions were for Ancel's well-being. That wasn't good enough for her considering what it had done to the Quintess and the others, but for now it would have to do.

Her thoughts drifted to Irmina and Eldanhill's refugees. She hoped Irmina managed to convince the Exalted to spare the lives of the council members. The refugees were of a greater concern. Neither they nor Kachien had made it to Torandil yet. They were several weeks late. Nothing good that she could think of would have caused such a delay.

Added to that dilemma was Jillian's disappearance. According to the other elders, she'd been gone for months, supposedly researching stories of shadelings somewhere to the north. The woman's absence worried her, considering what they were about to face. They could use Jillian's input and her eagles. Why the woman would disobey her orders and leave the planning for their trip from Torandil in someone else's hands was not acceptable.

Galiana stood and walked over to one of the large windows looking out onto the city. Considered an architectural wonder by many, Torandil sat at the edge of the Hallowed Cliffs, overlooking Bluewater Bay and the many islands and ships dotting its surface. Black basalt, sandstone, bloodstone, and feldspar mixed in with cobalt made up the ordered buildings within the city. Sunlight reflected from them in a myriad of colors that never failed to leave her breathless.

She stared across to where the bay's water caressed the sky, one melding into the other like entwined lovers.

Beyond that horizon lay Ostania, Seti, and the city of Benez. Beyond that horizon was a new beginning. One begun by bloodshed and would end in more before it was done. But it was a beginning nonetheless.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Enter."

Jerem strode in quickly followed by Ryne. White hair sprinkled with silver strands, Jerem appeared almost emaciated beneath his silver robes. Events had to be taking a great toll on him, yet, he still had a light step to his walk.

"We have a problem," Jerem said.

"Well, good day to you too," she replied.

"No time for niceties. We've been betrayed."

She frowned. "By who?"

"Kachien. She's taken the refugees to Randane."

A chill eased down Galiana's spine to match her mounting consternation. "Why Randane?"

"There's only one reason I can think of. The Bastion. Whoever controls the city must be able to use its power." Robes swirling about him, Jerem paced back and forth across the carpet. "It makes what the Assembly did even more worrisome."

Galiana waited for the man to sort his thoughts.

Jerem continued to pace, head down, brow furrowed tightly. He stopped and looked at her. "Why would the Assembly withdraw their forces from Randane knowing the possible threat a Bastion in the hands of its enemies might cause?"

"They did what?" Galiana couldn't hold back her shock. A Bastion in the wrong person's possession could be used to circumvent the Vallum's protection.

"The only Tribunal forces close to Randane are those stationed at Eldanhill under Exalted Leukisa and Ordelia."

"Two of our own," Galiana mused. "Your orders or the Assembly's?"

"Theirs, which means they know where their allegiance lies. I believe the others are of the Shadow Council."

"That or they belong to the Nine. What do you think, Ryne?" She glanced at the giant man who'd stood silent as he listened.

"It could be worse than simply belonging to the Nine," he said. "One of them could be one of the Nine."

"What makes you think that?" she asked, even as she prayed for Ryne to be wrong.

"Too many coincidences, too many pieces moving in concert, too

many things in favor of the Nine's goals. It's like watching a senjin game without rules unfold. They're overwhelming us because they can cross zones they aren't supposed to be able to. We're stuck in our area while they have us outnumbered and outmaneuvered."

"You sound as if you're saying we do not stand a chance," Jerem said.

"If we don't change the rules, maybe. At this point, it's in our interest to assume there are no rules. The Nine intend to replace the gods. The White Council's primary purpose is to release Ilumni. The Shadow Council wants the same for Amuni. Those don't exactly fall outside of what the Nine need. The Gray, on the other hand, wish for things to remain the same, for the people to rule themselves, beholding to no gods."

"Which is no different than it always was," Jerem pointed out.

Jerem's lack of surprise or questioning of what the Nine might be registered with her. As usual, the old bastard knew more than he was willing to reveal. She would take the issue up with him at some point, but now was not the time.

"Yes, which supports my line of thinking," Ryne said. "In order to replace the gods, the Nine need an influx of power. I believe the conflicts started by the Tribunal over the years were more than to just increase the longevity of the Ashishin. Suppose, that like Amuni's daemons, the Nine have been siphoning sela into the Nether?"

"What made you think of this?" Galiana asked, skeptical but still pondering if it all of it was possible. If it happened to be true, then this Nine Ryne spoke of had been gathering power for millennia.

"What I saw in the zyphyl."

"And you believe those dreams, those temptations?" Jerem's expression made his opinion clear.

"Mere dreams for those not an Eztezian." Ryne let out a breath as if releasing a great weight from his shoulders. "For us, they are the futures, the past, the present, the many possibilities that exist."

"The Chronicles," Galiana whispered in awe.

"Yes, and they can get a hold of you, drive you in ways you might not wish. It's why we banished the zyphyls o the farthest reaches of Everland."

A knock at the door stopped Galiana from offering her opinion. "Who is it this time," she called.

High Shin Cantor strode in, his face a mask of worry. "Word has come from the Iluminus. They are ready to act now."

"They cannot possibly be," Galiana protested. "This is too soon, much too soon."

"Time waits for no one," Jerem said.

"Why though?" Galiana pursed her lips. There was no way

Quintess should be ready to make her move. Neither the refugees from Eldanhill or the other Mysteras were safe in Seti as planned.

"According to the reports, the Assembly has summoned the majority of their armies from all over Granadia."

"To what end?" Galiana asked. "And if so, it only makes Quintess' position in the Iluminus even more a risk."

"Let me guess." Furrows lined Ryne's forehead. "They did not send them to the Iluminus. They deployed them in Ostania, either at Felan Mark or at the entrance to the Vallum itself."

Cantor nodded.

Now, Galiana understood. "They are planning to stop us. The only other access through the Vallum is from the Iluminus itself." Her mind continued to work. The Matii from the Mysteras in Redemia, Konil, and Torcal combined with the ones she'd sent ahead to Torandil months ago, made for a force of over forty thousand, at least half of who were Forgers. That was without counting what the Svenzar brought or the thirty thousand from the Dosteri. An imposing army against many an adversary. Not so in relation to what the Tribunal could muster.

"A bold move, but it does make sense," Jerem said. "Why come after us when we have to go to them?"

"What should we do?" Galiana was not frightened in the least, but she would rather face the Tribunal's Matii without risking the refugees.

"Attack," said a raspy voice.

Everyone turned to Ancel's bed. His Etchings rippled across his chest and arms as he sat up, sunlight glinting off the intricate artwork.

"That's madness," Cantor hissed.

"No." The hoarseness in Ancel's voice made it crack. "Think on it. They expect us at the Vallum or at least in Felan Mark. More than likely they have spies among us, Listeners, just like you have among them. By pooling the majority of their army there, they tell us two things. One: they fear the threat we've become. Two: the Iluminus is now their weakest point. I overheard much of what you said. You already have people within the Iluminus. Surprise will be your advantage."

Those words made Galiana regard Ancel in a new light. He might be as much a strategist as his father.

"Not only will you save the thousands here in Torandil, but you will be able to free my father, or at least try."

Galiana glanced at all the others, not quite certain what she was hearing, but Ryne's and Jerem's intrigued expressions matched her own suspicion. "It sounds as if you have other plans."

Ancel's eyes were hard, glinting emeralds. "I trusted, Kachien. If

this is how she repays that trust, then there can only be one outcome. My father left our people's fate in my hands. I will not disappoint him. Whatever I have to do, I will get them back or die trying. When I'm finished with Randane, whoever or whatever is there, will find no cobble to hide beneath."

"Have you given any thought to it being a trap? That this might be exactly what they want? For you to rush off and play savior." Galiana kept her gaze fixed on Ancel's face for any sign of doubt, but she saw none.

"I *know* it's a trap. King Emory or whoever owns him, wants me, even more so now that I escaped his grasp last time. I'll give him what he desires, what the shade desires … me. I will let them have a taste of what I bring." For an instant, his Etchings glowed. "We fight while we take our people to safety. It was silly to think we could do this without losses, without sacrifice. We paid in blood in the past. We will pay now too. But from them we will take what matters most. Their hearts."

Moments passed in silence as not only she, but also the others stared at Ancel. Pride shone from Ryne's expression, and she was certain hers might be showing as plainly. She regarded Jerem, who appeared oblivious to all around him as he stroked his wisp of a beard. She could picture Ancel's suggestions growing in her old mentor's head, expanding as he analyzed possible outcomes.

"Well said." Jerem strode over to the window and looked out. "I will send word to Leukisa and Ordelia to assist you at Randane. As for myself, I cannot return to Calisto. The Exalted have already made a decision concerning me. Several High Shin and Raijin loyal to them invaded the city.

"I've brought those loyal to me here already. Coupled with the Matii you all possess and the Dosteri's military, we may succeed striking where they least expect. Plus, it is not as if we intend to hold the Iluminus. Between you," he turned to nod toward her, "myself, Ryne, and the other High Shin on our side, we can hold it long enough to escape through the Vallum and into the Sands of the Abandoned. From there, we cross the Cogal Drin Mountains and into Benez. Not the plan I had, but it will do."

Galiana could see how it might work. With support from within the Iluminus, they might manage it after all.

"I'm afraid I will not be accompanying you into Benez," Ryne said. "I will help as I can with the Iluminus, and no, I will not be there for you either, Ancel. I have faith you will handle what comes until we meet again. I had planned to help my fellow Eztezians at the Great Divide once I took you to safety, but everything I saw within the zyphyl tells me they need me now."

“Why there?” Jerem asked. “The Skadwaz are massing millions of shadelings northwest of it. Even you and the others would be hard pressed to stop them without help.”

“Because we have no choice, Jerem. It’s either we stop them or the Sanctums of Shelter will fall. As the Sanctums go, so goes the rest of the world, swept under by a black tide before we’ve been able to mount our first real offense.”

Around the room, silence reigned. With so much hanging in the balance, they had to cast aside all doubts. They’d prepared for this for all these years. In ways, it felt good to know the first major battle hovered on the horizon.

“Then, we must plan,” Galiana said, “and be quick about it.”

Ancel sent out for Mirza, and they began to lay down the foundations for what they hoped would be victory.

Chapter 47

Although not fully recovered from his ordeal with the zyphyl, Ancel felt a lot better. Seeing Danvir and Alys again certainly helped. Until he considered the news he had for them.

Danvir had grown larger than when he was in Eldanhill. Not much prettier though. The same old too big ears and nose stood out in his face. Alys, on the other hand, was more beautiful, hair the ochre of sunset, her features fine, an orchid blossoming more lovely than any other bloom.

"We thought you'd never make it here." Alys smelled of saffron and roses. "Rumors have been spreading that the Ashishin attacked Eldanhill."

"They did, but we managed to escape, as you see." Ancel missed the times they once spent together. Overburdening her or Danvir with the details of what occurred in Eldanhill seemed unnecessary.

"What about the others?" Face clean-shaven, and dressed in an immaculate blue coat with white scrollwork down the arms, Danvir made for quite an imposing figure. "My father, Devan, the other council members, the other refugees? I heard that many who abandoned their farms and villages went to Eldanhill. I had cousins among them. Distant ones, but still family."

This part pained Ancel. He'd chosen to deliver the news to them in person while Galiana's task was to inform the rest. "Some went to Descane and Old Paltz. I hope your distant cousins might be with them."

"Where else would they be?" Danvir's brow puckered.

Ancel sighed. "For whatever reason, it appears that Kachien took the last set of refugees to Randane."

Alys gasped, bringing a hand to cover her mouth. Danvir's reaction was a tightening of his jaws and ham-sized fists. His arms looked as if they would burst from the sleeves of his coat.

"I warned you about trusting her." Danvir's voice hissed between clenched teeth. "I warned you."

"You did. But nothing changes what has happened already."

"What are Galiana and the others planning to do about it?" Alys wrung her hands.

"They have other issues to worry about-"

"Other issues!" Danvir blurted, his face darkening. "What could possibly be more important than our own?"

"Nothing."

"But you-"

"Dan, you know I wouldn't leave them to their fate, but we have

you and the others here to worry over also. Granadia is no longer safe for any of us. In a few days we'll be leaving to bring those here to some place safe."

"There's no safer place than where we are now, on this side of the Vallum."

Ancel smiled inwardly. Danvir wasn't dumb by any means. Never had been. "Maybe that was once true, but with shadelings here, and the Tribunal after us, not to mention the hate the rest of Granadia harbors against the Setian, we have little choice."

"I am not Setian," Danvir said. "I was born here."

"Tell that to any one of the other kingdoms who have already sent threats to King Tozian."

"Wait." A frown creased Alys' forehead. "You don't mean heading to Ostania, do you?"

"I do."

"What does my father think about this and the rest of the council?" Danvir asked.

The anger written across Danvir's face was so raw that Ancel was taken aback. His friend had voiced his displeasure before he left with the others for Torandil, but his loathing of who they were had grown with time. Ancel wondered how many others felt the same way. "The council supported this decision, Dan."

"I don't believe you. Where is my father now so I can ask him?"

He had succeeded in avoiding the question once, but Ancel knew he wouldn't be able to again. All he could picture was the pain and the anger his words would bring. Overcome with emotion he hadn't realized he'd buried deep inside, he leaned back and closed his eyes against the urge to cry.

"What is it, Anc?" Alys' fingers touched his, tentative at first, but then gripped him stronger, squeezing. "What's wrong?"

Fighting hard to keep his expression steady, he met her eyes. "Your father … my father … the rest of the council … gave themselves up to the Tribunal to help us escape."

"No, no." Alys' face contorted; tears streamed down her cheeks.

Danvir stood abruptly, fists quivering. "Tell me this isn't true, Ancel. Tell me," he pleaded.

Mouth downturned, all Ancel could manage was to gaze at his friend. Danvir spun on his heels and stalked from the room. Before Ancel uttered another word, Alys ran after Dan, sobbing. When they left, Ryne walked in.

"I guess they didn't take it well?" Ryne crossed the room, outfitted in his leather armor, one hand on the greatsword at his hip.

Ancel scowled and turned away to gaze out a large window, its open panes stained in red, green, and blue to match the others in the

castle's northernmost tower. The city below was a beehive of activity. Along lanes and avenues, people packed their belongings into wagons and carts. Many, who weren't natives, lined the docks or made their way to them along the roads and paths carved into the cliff faces that led to the BlueWater Bay. Ships and boats of all sorts congregated on the ocean. Soldiers in Dosteri colors kept order throughout the city, ensuring that the mass exodus did not lead to riots. At the front gates, more folk streamed out than in. Those on horse or in coaches and wagons inched forward. This high up, the crowd noise was more a buzz than the normal chaotic din associated with a city of Torandil's size. The Guardian Wall and the Quaking Forest were the lone banners flying.

"Some days I wish I could make all this go away," Ancel said. "The worry, the pain, the anger, the uncertainty, the war, the death to come … the betrayal." Kachien's involvement in what was happening cut deep, even if he found it hard to believe. The visions within the zyphyl had shown him other possibilities. Ones that confirmed his suspicions about the way the wolves acted back in Eldanhill. "I wish I could make it all go away."

Ryne remained silent.

"If wishes had wings," Ancel said to himself. Cohorts formed ranks on a wide avenue, enough to be at least one full legion, their weapon and armor reflecting the morning sun. He took a deep breath. Alys' perfume still tickled his nose. "Do you think we have enough to accomplish our plan? And will the others," he pointed out the window to those already fleeing the city, "the rest of them be safe from any retaliation?"

"I cannot reassure you that anyone will be safe. They are making a choice they have to live with." Ryne paused. "As for our forces, Kendin and some of his Sven will accompany you. The Dosteri refuse to let you go without several of their cohorts. And apparently, while you were training in the Entosis, the remainder of the mountain clans, both Nema and Seifer made their way here. Half of them demanded to be a part of that battle. The other will fight at the Iluminus."

Frowning, Ancel faced Ryne. "Why?"

"I noticed it when I first arrived in Eldanhill. Many of the Dosteri, the Nema, and the Seifer are of the same bloodline. They were originally Erastonians."

"From Everland?"

"The same. It is because of your father's actions that they still live. If not for the preparations he made right before the Shadowbearer War, the Dosteri as we know them would not exist today. They owe him a life debt they say. It extends to all his immediate family. They feel they owe him even more now with some

of their people's betrayal."

A memory sparked within Ancel's mind like a lamp blinking on at dusk. He recalled the entire passage from the Chronicle of Undeath, of the Dosteri's rise and the essences. "So it seems one of your Chronicles is true." If indeed it referred to him, then he still lacked fire, ice, and shade. That last brought apprehension creeping through his body.

"Unfortunately, yes." The big man's features saddened. "Do you know why I named it Undeath?"

"After the zyphyl, I think I do. I saw what happens when daemons harvest sela. The zyphyl showed me what will become of the people in Randane. Not just the ones from Eldanhill, but everyone not aligned to the shade."

"It's the fate most of us will suffer if the shade wins out."

"And the Nine?"

Ryne shrugged. "Who knows, but from what I have seen, it wouldn't be much better. At least not for us. Slavery, used as cattle, or worse."

Ancel didn't want to imagine what could be worse than that already mentioned. "Are you certain you wouldn't prefer to help me in Randane?"

"What I would rather do, and what I must do, are two different things. We all have a part to play. I believe you're strong enough for this. Don't doubt yourself. It's a precursor to failure. Strike hard and fast."

"Even if it means I must kill some of my own? Or someone I love?"

"Then so be it." Ryne's gaze was cold and unwavering. "People die so others may live. It is a harsh reality, but a reality nonetheless."

As much as Ancel agreed, he couldn't find the words to say so. He turned away from Ryne and gazed outside once more. "Have them bring the preparations to an end. We must attack before word of our exodus reaches anyone."

Chapter 48

Irmina knew stealth would be of no use here. Even within the Iluminus' dungeons, no shadow existed. Light radiated from the walls. Besides, she was a Raijin. What she needed to do was be herself. Dressed in the black, form-fitting uniform with crimson sleeves of her calling, she approached the dungeon guards with an expression that screamed she'd gut anyone who stood in her path. So much so, that not only did they avert their eyes, but not one among them questioned her. The score of Dagodin following behind her marched in a rhythm to challenge the finest army.

These weren't the deepest cells-those were reserved for the more violent offenders, those the Pathfinders had captured-but they still stunk of piss, shit, unwashed bodies, and blood. A hallway lined with metal doors stretched before her. Moans, groans, and muttering echoed along its length in odd counterpoint to her soft footsteps and the louder leather on stone thud of her Dagodin complement. The dissonance was a grim reminder of the impressive number of prisoners the Iluminus kept. As tempting as it was to free many for sheer chaos, she'd come here for a select few.

Although she knew the cells by memory, she stepped to each one she needed anyway, slid back the metal grate over the solitary window, and peered inside. Refusing to cringe at the stench, the half-healed wounds, yellowed and scabbing patches of skin, and disheveled, torn clothing on people she barely recognized anymore, she gave commands to remove each Eldanhill Council member.

Guthrie Bemelle was a sliver of his former self, clothes hanging loosely around what was once a barrel of a belly, his cheeks withdrawn, jawbones protruding. Devan Faber wasn't much better, the mining foreman having lost the slabs of muscle that marked him. If Javed was old before, his current appearance leaned toward senile, the once robust kennel and stable owner now feeble, his skin drawn tight over his skull.

Irmina frowned at the next two cells. Of Edwin Valdeen and Rohan Lankon, she found no signs. An awful feeling gnawed at the pit of her stomach.

Stefan's condition was by far the worse. She couldn't help the involuntary hiss that escaped her lips. Jaw lopsided, his face wore a mask of purple and black. Scrawled across his back was a tapestry of cuts, welts, and scabs. Blood crusted his missing fingernails. The usually well-groomed gray hair was dirty and matted brown; his unkempt mustache and beard formed a bush. Not once did Ancel's father raise his head when the two Dagodin entered and picked him

up under his armpits. He didn't even groan.

Fighting hard to maintain an uncaring facade, Irmina spun on her heels and strode back to the exit. It took all of her composure not to lash out at the dungeon guards as she passed them. She led the way upstairs, wincing every time she heard a moan behind her.

"Traitor." Underneath the painful rasp, she picked out Devan's voice. "Why don't you just finish us off? There's nothing more left to tell."

Irmina continued on as if she hadn't heard the man. Once up several flights and out of earshot from the guards, she stopped. "Where's Edwin and Rohan?"

A coughing laugh rattled from Devan's chest. He spat out blood that landed near her feet. "Edwin's a traitor like you. From what the questioners said, Rohan's gone. You fucks tortured him to death."

Both Guthrie and Stefan appeared to be unconscious.

After saying a quick prayer for the old man, she said, "I'm here to rescue you. And I didn't betray you." She gestured to the Dagodin holding Devan. "As planned, get them on the wagons and head to the Travelshaft. I have to find the other one." If Edwin had betrayed them, he would pay with his life.

The men gave slight nods. They headed up the last flight of stairs and into the courtyard. After a futile search, she rejoined them. Moments later, they were heading down a wide avenue with their wounded charges in the back of a wagon drawn by two horses. The usual crowds on the street cleared a path for them, some stopping to whisper or point. As they walked, Irmina got the niggling sense that something wasn't quite right. Her escort must have felt it too, because they grew more vigilant and kept their hands on their swords.

When they rounded a corner onto the Shining Way, the avenue was empty. Irmina stopped. The busiest road in all the Iluminus over the past months, she'd never seen it without its traffic. The mesh of walkways directly above her were the same. She spun, glancing in the opposite direction. In the distance, folk crossed several other paths, but they were hurrying. The shuffle of feet behind her and the occasional moan were the only sounds to break the silence. The empty eyes of the buildings and towers around them watched, the doors open but without a single patron or hawker. As always, the air within the Iluminus was still and motionless.

"Be ready," she said to the nearest Dagodin. She gave the signal and strode forward.

The wagon wheels' rumble, the clip clop of horses' hooves, and the thud of her soldiers' feet might have been the only sounds louder than her own beating heart. Irmina kept her focus on the interconnecting lanes, the doors and windows in her periphery. Any

movement would meet violence.

A brush of wind where there should have been none announced the attack.

“Above us,” she yelled, rolling away.

A flash of black and red landed next to her. A woman garbed as she was, brandished a short sword, cowl pulled tight over her head so only eyes showed, Similar forms fell all around them.

“Now,” Irmina said.

She opened her Matersense and felt the others around her do the same. It was odd being linked to Pathfinders in this fashion. To her, it was almost like touching the mind of an animal, except there was coherent thought rather than a ball of emotions. Oneness filled her, the collective consciousness drowning out any urges from the voices that normally rose with touching the essences.

Before the Raijin reacted, the Pathfinders, disguised as Dagodin, created individual shields for each person and the wagon. Along the exteriors of the buildings that lined the Shining Way, the walls shimmered. Ashishin appeared, having Forged a Masking to camouflage themselves as stone. Hands upraised, they shot arrows of light.

The projectiles blazed a trail through the air as they punched into the Raijin from all sides before slamming into the shields and dissipating. Smoking, bloody holes, no bigger than coins, riddled the Raijin uniforms. One by one, enemy Matii crumpled to the cobbles.

Yet as much surprise as her forces had on their side, some of the Raijin were able to react. They were trained and bred for this. Several had thrown up their own shields. A second group dropped from the walkways. Together, they turned on those near the buildings.

A storm of steel ensued.

This close, no one, not even the Ashishin dared to Forge. That gave the Raijin the advantage. As assassins, their close quarter combat was near unparalleled in the Iluminus. Within minutes, they decimated the Ashishin ranks in flashes of weapons, bone, blood, and screams.

The lone High Shin, Delienza, that led this first group for Irmina, was still standing, along with two Pathfinders. Not giving them a moment, the remainder of the Raijin charged in. Backs to each the other, the three fought, their weapons a synchronous flow of defense.

That was when the next group of Raijin dropped down.

High Shin Delienza gave a near imperceptible nod.

Irmina issued a silent prayer then called out, “Full shields.”

As a small cocoon of light and air essences wrapped around her group, there came a thump. Struggling for balance against the ripple in the ground, Irmina dropped to one knee and watched.

An eight-foot wave of earth washed out from Delienza and her Pathfinders in a concentric circle. Part slammed into the building, shattering its supports. The other raced toward Irmina and her charges. The ground swallowed the Raijin and continued to flow outward. With a rumble, the building collapsed, Delienza and her two disappearing from view amid mortar, brick, and dust.

"Go," Irmina yelled, once the attack dissipated against their shields.

Her Ashishin on the opposite side hadn't managed to replicate Delienza's feat. It wouldn't take long for the surviving Rajin to regroup.

The driver snapped his reins. Horses whinnying, the wagon surged forward, away from the destruction. Ahead, a glow lit the skyline between the towers and spires.

"Their other attacks will follow now," she said, remembering Quintess instructions on Raijin tactics. They would attempt for quick kills. Failing that, the Tribunal would send whoever remained.

Irmina didn't like the idea of hurting those who might be innocent in all this, but neither could she pick and choose who to fight. These men and women were following orders. It was either her life or theirs. She had a certain attachment to hers.

All pretenses gone, they sped down the avenue, horses' hooves clattering, leaving the screams and moans of the dying behind. Irmina glanced back and nearly tripped. She had expected to see the Raijin running after them. Instead, the Matii disappeared and then reappeared several dozen feet from their original locations. Squinting, she picked out what they did. They were leaping from one mass of light essences to the other.

"Shimmering," Hardan said from next to her, dropping his disguise. He made a signal and two Pathfinders stopped running.

They flung their hands out from left to right. Stone and wood ripped from the buildings and zipped toward the oncoming Matii. Then as one, the Pathfinders pushed their arms to the sky and pulled down. A translucent distortion formed above their fists. They made dual motions as if pushing something of great weight away from them. Irmina gaped as swaths of air coalesced, changing the once clear, even, light into semi-opaque, undulating bands.

Whatever it was, it threw off the Raijin's Shimmers. It was as if they slammed into walls. In response, the Raijin had to spend time working around the Pathfinder Forges.

"May the essences bless them." Hardan's tone radiated reverence.

For a moment, Irmina frowned before she understood what he meant. The Pathfinders intended to sacrifice themselves to buy her more time. Not allowing the shock to overcome her, she focused

ahead, ignoring Hardan's signal to have two more of his men drop off to defend. She couldn't help but wince every time steel clashed and screams echoed from behind.

They rounded a corner leading to a large square and the road near the Travelshaft. Immediately, they drew up short. She should have felt some exultation at acquiring her destination, but that troubled sense from when she found Rohan and Edwin missing still niggled at her. When she saw the square, she knew why.

Glass, pieces of buildings, dust, blood, and bodies littered the flagstones. With the earlier sound of battle all around her, she never heard this attack. Now, it echoed with the clash of steel and the bellows and cries of those locked in combat.

The many Matii who had joined their cause struggled mightily against an army of Dagodin, Raijin, Ashishin, and High Shin all wearing the Tribunal's crimson, gold, black or white. Where space separated them, the Tribunal's forces cut swaths into her army with Forgings of fire and light.

Buildings burned. Flames trailed along the cobbles, petering out, blackened stone left in its wake. Where the few Pathfinders loyal to her cause tried to form shields, Raijin appeared. Exchanges of sword and knife work happened faster than any untrained eye could follow, often resulting in the Pathfinder lying in a pool of blood. Ashishin attempting to do the same met a similar fate. So concerned was her people with defense, they were unable to attack.

Toward the square's center, a milling mass of the Tribunal's Dagodin and Raijin fought against a clump of defenders. Among the crowd, Irmina picked out High Jin Quintess' strained face as she sent arrows of earth out into the attackers. A flick of a hand from Berenil at her side brought lightning shooting down from the clear sky, blasting foe and friend alike from their feet. Cobalt charges sputtered across the ground where men once stood.

A hand on her shoulder brought her attention to Hardan. He pointed past the battle toward the stretch that led to the liquid, silvery monolith that was the zyphyl. Behind it, set into a large tower, the Travelshaft's darkness loomed. Upon a balcony, dressed in full High Shin regalia, stripes covering his robes, his cloak as dead as the nonexistent wind, Buneri overlooked the square.

Irmina snarled. She'd known from the start that the man was more than he let on.

"Do not attack him." There was a sense of urgency in Hardan's voice she hadn't heard before.

Confused, she frowned at him.

"I suspected but I never knew for sure. He's a netherling. What's inside of us is reacting too violently to this much sela for him to hide

himself. If you attack him, you will break the contract that's saving most of their lives. It's the only thing preventing any of us from becoming physically involved against humans."

Irmina nodded. Hardan had been insistent on their comprehension of those specific rules. She'd been unsure of his reasons until now.

"What can we do to stop him or them?" She nodded toward Buneri's Matii.

Half of her original fifteen thousand remained. The rest were dead or dying, their bodies strewn about the square. The survivors were steadily retreating while attempting to keep Quintess and Berenil alive. Already she'd practically given up hope on assistance from Torandil. At least not in time to escape the Iluminus. However, if they managed to hold out in one of the buildings, help might yet arrive.

"You can do nothing. I, on the other hand …"

As his voice trailed off, Irmina glanced at Hardan. Eyes widening at what she saw, she almost lashed out with a Forge. She had to remind herself that she trusted him.

Hardan's body twisted to an inhuman angle. His hand reached up and snapped his head over until it lay parallel to his shoulders. A tentacle, black as charcoal, sprouted from his neck. His body contorted, bloating then deflating as if something writhed within his armor. With a wet sound, the armor burst apart, revealing a writhing mass. Black skin stretched over muscle and sinew. A snake-like head rose up as the netherling grew. Horns sprouted from its head. Chitinous armor formed to cover the body. Four limbs, two on each side, jutted out from the rib cage. Hardan, now as a full netherling, screeched, the sound carrying across the battlefield. His eight eyes opened, milky white against the ebony of his face.

The entire battle stopped.

Darkness streaked from Hardan toward the balcony where Buneri stood. Hardan's body followed, blurring across the distance.

"Raijin Irmina, Raijin Irmina," a voice called, insistent, a hand tugging her arm.

Still in shock, she looked down. A Pathfinder wearing a strip of color on his arm that signified he belonged to her knelt at her feet.

"High Jin Quintess sent me to remind you of the zyphyl. She said now is the time."

The words registered with Irmina even as she nodded absently. Yet, all she managed was to direct her attention to the balcony.

Buneri and Hardan had become a haze of whipping tentacles, strikes, and screeches. Their limbs were too hard to follow. At times it appeared Hardan had the upper hand, but Buneri slipped away on every occasion as if he was toying with him.

Below them, the battle had resumed. Several Dagodin archers in support of Buneri fired arrows up toward Hardan when he backed off a few feet. Blackness streaked down from him to tear them apart. It congealed into tiny eel-like minions.

The warning gong to announce passage through the Travelshaft wailed. The sound broke Irmina from her trance of watching the netherlings fight. She dashed toward the zyphyl.

Chapter 49

With the bells droning their arrival, Galiana stepped from the zyphyl's grasp and opened her Matersense. Spread to her left and right, the army of Dosteri; the Mysteras' refugees; thousands of clansmen in fur and leather, their great wolves and daggerpaws beside them; and the Matii commanded by Cantor shifted into ordered formations under the watchful eyes and yells of Weaponmasters. At first glance, one might have expected this to be a haphazard formation, but they'd been preparing for this. It showed in their rigid ranks.

She gazed out onto the city and school she once held dear. When they left Torandil, she warned everyone to expect some resistance, but she could not have anticipated what she saw before her. Chaos ruled. She couldn't help but to stare for a moment before she collected her thoughts.

In the main square, all manner of Matii battled. The ones ahead of her were forcing another set to retreat. It didn't take her long to discern the two sides. Those with armbands that signified their alignment with the Gray Council were losing … badly

Bodies and rubble littered once pristine flagstones. Intermingled with the reek of burned flesh, the acrid pall of smoke hung heavy, drifting into the air in gray plumes. Fire shot back and forth between the two groups. Lightning arced from the sky. Luminescent beams and bolts streaked and rippled across any distance separating the opposing forces before cutting swaths wherever they struck. Concussions rocked the plaza. Eerie screeches echoed. From what she could not tell or see. Steel rang on steel.

Where Raijin clashed against any other Matii, the fight turned quickly in the Tribunal's favor. Only the Gray Council groups with Pathfinders offered any real resistance against them.

Tribunal cohorts reformed quickly to face Galiana and the arriving army. Comprised mainly of Dagodin brandishing sword and board or long lances, their uniforms and armor crimson to match their Ashishin counterparts, they were rigid in their discipline, unflinching with their response. At least a score of High Shin, their robes made up solely of colorful stripes, revealed themselves among the ranks. None appeared surprised or concerned by the presence of a new threat.

At their head was High Shin Neftana, her willowy form unmistakable. From Cantor's reports, the woman should have been dead. The way she marched ahead of her forces spoke of her usual overconfidence.

Galiana signaled, and shields blossomed all around her. As Forges

began in concert from the Tribunal Matii, the essences congealed, giving the air itself a thick texture. A nimbus grew, not only near them, but also spreading across and up as they drew on sunlight itself, one of the most powerful sources of the Streams.

All across the enemy lines, the cobbles lurched, once, twice, and then in waves that raced across the ground, tossing the enemy from their feet. With a rumble to challenge an avalanche, bricks and debris blasted at least forty feet into the air, taking soldiers with it.

The fountain assumed a gigantic humanoid form, twisted metal outlining a skeleton, stone blocks clacking together for muscle and body like a building creating itself without workers. Debris that should have fallen to the ground hung suspended for impossible moments before zipping into the monolith. The soldiers unlucky enough to be caught within the process were added as part of the titanic creature. Blood dribbled down its exterior. Its face formed into Halvor's countenance. He roared, the wind from his voice billowing Galiana's cloak.

Similar, smaller shapes followed by the thousands. In as much time as it took an eye to blink, each one resolved into Sven several times their normal height.

They smashed into the Tribunal lines. The enemy formation shattered under the impact. Armor was no match for the stoneform creatures. They swatted aside Dagodin and Ashinshin with no more regard than if they were insects.

As disciplined as the Tribunal's armies often were, the sight of small mountains with arms and legs tearing into their ranks sent them into a panic. Ashishin lashed out with their Forges. The attacks did more damage than good as they blasted into not only Sven but their own allies as well. The Sven bellowed before massive arms swung down to turn human bodies into pulp.

Galiana cringed as she watched the decimation. Years spent fighting the Harnan and the Sven in the Nevermore Heights resurfaced. She could imagine the horror these Matii experienced. It had been the same for her.

Not all the Tribunal's soldiers faltered. Led by High Shin and the more battle-hardened Raijin, small pockets fought together. Instead of attacking with Forges, they relied on the *divya* they wielded. Using the power imbued into their armor, they became little more than red streaks that darted from one Sven to the next. They delved into fighting Styles and Stances too intricate for her to follow, each one an imitation of an essence. The squeal or ping of metal meeting stoneform flesh quickly became painful bellows.

Eyes ablaze, Neftana strode forward, thin, heated lines tinged with darkness spurting from her fingers to slice through several stone

and metal-encrusted legs. When the affected Sven crashed to the earth amid billows of dirt and dust, Dagodin fell upon them, spears and swords flashing as they rose and fell. The Sven buried under that melee did not rejoin the battle.

Almost an entire cohort had surrounded Halvor. Galiana gripped her robes against the urge to Forge and help him. Their plan demanded her discipline even if it meant seeing them die. Of that, Halvor had insisted.

The Svenzar let out a shout to challenge thunder. The noise broke through the din of battle, the cries of men and beast. It was as if for a moment the conflict paused. He folded his arms across his chest and tucked his head down. His Sven copied him.

"Kill them!" Neftana screamed, panic clear in her voice.

Before the first weapon struck, the surface of each Sven and the Svenzar burst like a boil pricked by a pin. A rain of earth, stone, and metal fell, much of it hanging unnaturally in the air. The creatures, now returned to their original sizes became one with the ground, sinking into it, their once hardened bodies dissolving into a muddy consistency.

The signal, at last. Tension eased from Galiana's shoulders.

First Jerem, and then Cantor and his Pathfinders strode next to her, followed by Jerem's Matii from Calisto. She felt the others gathering, the essences rushing into them. Raijin could manage a vast number of feats, as could Pathfinders and High Shin, but none could defend against the element of surprise.

While she watched, most of the debris changed shape in midair. It became solid. Tiny legs sprouted-legs resembling those that belonged to a spider but tipped with bone. Wild screeches echoed as the cause for the panic in Neftana's voice became clear. By the tens of thousands, mindless gerde formed, each one half the size of a man. When they landed, they skittered across the ground, more insect than Sven, their eight legs propelling them at incredible speed. They leaped on any person close enough, spiky attachments on the ends of their feet stabbing into armor and flesh, tearing bodies asunder. The battle became a blood sea.

Keeping her expression stoic despite the bile in her throat, Galiana raised a hand. With the Pathfinders this close, she basked in the pleasure of not feeling or hearing the essences' maddening whispers. To her right and left, standard-bearers waved flags, the Guardian Wall and the Quaking Forest flying high.

Power built within her. It grew from a thrum to a whine. Sweet ecstasy. She unleashed the first salvo and the others with her.

Her attacks were the finest streaks of heat and light, honed to points like crossbow bolts. Jerem and the other High Shin repeated

her Forging. His Matii sent forth a rolling wave of fire.

Her targets were the opposing High Shin and Raijin. Kill the head and the body will follow. The flame wall was meant for the gerde.

All along the Tribunal's lines, Matii fell, pierced through the chest or head, wounds cauterizing after the essences struck. The fire wave washed over them.

Buried in heat and flame, screams and wails issued from the Matii and gerde alike, the humans sounds somehow more animalistic in their death throes. The cacophony crawled across Galiana's skin. She whispered a prayer for the dead.

Her attention turned to the remainder of the battle. Smoke choked the air in black plumes. Halvor and the Sven had reemerged in several other areas, now more their normal size but no less deadly. The Svenzar was helping a group of Pathfinders who were defending a wagon. Galiana squinted. A familiar form in full black Raijin regalia fought against others similarly garbed. Accompanied by two Pathfinders, Irmina was carving a path toward her and the Travelshaft. Death walked with her.

A strange occurrence caught Galiana's eye. Darkness blurred around several Forgers. The men and women uttered wordless screams before they fell, their bodies riddled with wounds. The darkness resolved into wriggling snake-like monstrosities.

What in Ilumin's name-?

The earlier screech cut her off. This time, when she glanced up, she picked out the sound's origin. Her breath caught in her throat.

On the balcony above them, two netherlings battled. The creatures were a mass of ebony chitin and tentacles. Mater flew from them at dazzling speeds. Not the single or dual essences she was so accustomed to but complete elements. The Forges were so complex that they passed beyond her comprehension. At times, the netherlings launched from the balcony out into midair, striking at each other before flitting back to solid ground. Neither appeared to have the advantage.

That all changed when several lightning bolts streaked down from what had been a clear sky but was now a mottled gray. Before they could strike their intended targets, tentacles flashed up to form a writhing, fleshy dome. The bolts struck and dissipated.

Galiana snatched a glance to discern the attack's origin. Several of her own Matii from Eldanhill and the other Mysteras were drawing in another stream of essences. "No!" she screamed. "NO! Fools you will break-"

But it was too late. Flame lances, their orange glow imprinting themselves on her retinas, shot toward the netherlings. In the same instant, darkness blurred to the Matii, reappearing as the black

creatures she noted earlier. Her warning cry died in her throat as the creatures devoured them like a school of carnivorous fish, tearing flesh from bone.

A piercing screech, higher and wilder than any before it, sent chills through her.

Impaled by the other's chitinous arms, the netherling that had used its tentacles for defense flopped to one side. When the victor glanced down toward her, she got the premonition the wrong one had died. With a high-pitched wail, it flung the corpse away.

Forge after Forge tore toward the creature. Helpless, Galiana could only stare as its tentacles whipped out. With ease, it deflected the attacks.

The netherling's counter came in the form of several hundred black beams no thicker than rope. Each connected to a person and ripped their spines from their bodies. Sela coalesced from each corpse. The worm-like minions streaked to the essences and devoured them. Moments later, Halvor and the Sven charged any other Matii who attempted to attack.

"We have to get to the Vallum now," Jerem yelled. "It's the only way to survive that thing."

Galiana nodded numbly. The calls went out for retreat. Even as they did so, more ropy tendrils shot out, ensnaring more of her people. The Tribunal's Matii had backed off to reform on one side of the square. This gave the netherling and its minions ample space to feed at will.

"There's no escape for us." Galiana's insides wilted. She found it fitting that all the years spent to make the world better would end where it all began.

"Tell that story to someone else," a voice said next to her.

She turned to see Irmina standing there, gaze riveted on the carnage within the square. The wagon, still guarded by the Pathfinders trundled behind her. Quintess and her own cohort was a part of the escort.

"I didn't begin this fight to see it end here." Irmina brushed back disheveled hair from her sooty, bloodstained face.

"No one here can defeat that." Jerem nodded toward the netherling. "With the bonds to restrict it broken, we will be nothing but fodder."

"You can call yourself food if you want, but I am no one's lunch. Gather as many survivors as you can. I will join you shortly after I buy us some time." The young Raijin's eyes grew steely as she stalked toward the Travelshaft.

Frowning, Galiana asked, "What do you plan to do?"

"Tame a zyphyl."

“How?”
“By promising what it desires most … freedom.”

Chapter 50

Cloak draped behind him, Ancel surveyed the cliffs looming above him. Randane's walls sprouted from them like rows of teeth, the towers along its length the fangs. He shielded his eyes against the swirling snow.

For this endeavor, he'd opted for his leathers alone and commanded all his men to do the same. Any slight advantage that would not hamper his movements might prove essential in the battle to come. Not to mention the stealth required for his plan to work. He'd had a hard time convincing High Shin Cantor to have the Pathfinders do the same. Apparently, they always wore their armor. When he gave them the ultimatum of changing or relinquishing their guardianship, they gave in. To hide their faces, they had donned hooded cloaks with scarfs over their mouths.

He'd allowed the Svenzar Kendin to lead their small contingent through the Travelshaft from Torandil to the ruins of some great city in the no man's land between Sendeth and Doster, east of Randane. According to Kendin, thousands of the shafts existed. The World's Veins, they called them. An apt name Ancel guessed, considering the powerful essences that resided within the Travelshafts. It was as if they made up a swift-flowing underground river whose water was almost as pure as the Mater within the Entosis.

When they arrived at Randane, they found an army of Dagodin and Ashishin led by Jerem's two Exalted. Trust was not a sentiment he ascribed to when it came to the Tribunal, so he'd used his aura sense to discern that they were indeed human. Undeniably strong in Mater, but human nonetheless. At his command, they waited on the plains, ready to be a diversion as he and the others breached the city.

Randane itself seemed much the same as he had left it the day he escaped. At least from this vantage point next to the Kelvore River. Although he could no longer see them, the spires that stabbed the sky had been as he remembered.

The plains near the castle were a different story. He recalled their appearance the day he and Kachien took their walk, made love in the small tributary, and his ability to see auras had manifested in response to his emotions. What amounted to a small town had thrived outside the city. Beyond the cheaply constructed wood and brick structures, the world was a green ocean interspersed with colorful blooms dotted by trees.

Now, all that remained of the town was rubble and char. Mud covered what were once fields, bleeding brown into what should have been a white sea. Reeking corpses littered the town's streets, wafting

to him even here. He put a hand over his mouth. When he first saw the thousands of bloated corpses the Tribunal's armies left behind, he'd spilled the contents of his stomach. He couldn't afford to show any weakness again, regardless of how the sight was forever burned into his memory.

Letting out a deep breath, he focused on the cliff spanning up from the half-frozen river. Voices whispered outside the Eye as he held onto his Matersense. He'd enveloped himself within both once he met Exalted Leukisa and Ordelia. A good decision too. The Eye had saved him from succumbing to the war of emotions he experienced when he saw the massacre outside the city.

The cliff and the filthy water gushing from the sewer exit were his key to breach the city's walls. The ability to reach the tunnel's entrance was another dilemma altogether. Layered ice coated the cliff, and although it covered most of the river in a sheet thick enough to hold considerable weight, the constant disturbance from the sewage runoff meant there was no way to reach the wall, much less the tunnel. Not if he didn't want his men to freeze to death. There was also the matter of the water in the tunnel itself. Imagining himself submerged within its icy grip made him shiver.

Kendin, the musical notes of his voice smooth and rhythmic, was conferring with Exalted Leukisa. The miniature versions of the Svenzar stood silently in the snow along the riverbank near the rest of Ancel's men with Mirza in command. Comprised of at least a hundred Seifer and Nema accompanied by their pets, three times that number in Dosteri Dagodin, as well as fifty Pathfinders, they amounted to more than a minor threat. Given their proximity to the castle, Ancel still marveled that a warning hadn't sounded. It made him realize the skill Leukisa possessed to go along with his strength. A strength belied by the Exalted's leathery skin drawn tight over his face, deep-sunken eyes, and gnarled fingers. Leukisa's Forging kept their presence hidden both in sight and sound.

As he studied the Forge, he picked out its delicate structure. Whereas he might have forced the essences into a solid, the Exalted had kept them as they were for the most part. They appeared natural, flowing at the correct points. Upon closer inspection, Leukisa had woven transparent bands of light thereby twisting exactly what the area revealed. When he didn't look at it through his Matersense, it appeared as if the cliff, the castle itself, and the trees along the bank, their trunks frozen until they burst, cast long shadows over mounds of snow.

To keep the noise of their presence from any guards, Leukisa diverted air essences, streaming them in the opposite direction well past the river's far bank. Ancel's lip twitched when he considered the

confused expression of anyone who happened to pass by the area reached by those sounds. The murmur of any conversation and the occasional grunt, bark, or snarl from a wolf or daggerpaw would certainly spark stories of a vale haunted by troubled spirits.

A low whine from Charra brought his attention back to his immediate surroundings. Kendin approached, his massive feet flattening the snow with each step, leaving imprints to match. He hoped the Svenzar had discovered a way to tackle the issue of the tunnel. Leukisa watched with those piercing eyes of his but kept his distance. If the Exalted had taken exception to Ancel's displeasure at his presence, he did not show it.

"Leukisa believes he can hide what we plan," Kendin said.

The Svenzar's speech was a contrast of high and low pitches with each word. If one didn't understand Sven, it was little more than odd tinkles and hums. Ancel didn't know why or how, but the more he'd heard the language, the more his ability to decipher it and eventually speak it, had increased. It was something he'd question Ryne about at some point. At present, he wasn't concerned. Learn, adapt, and take advantage. A mantra from *the Disciplines*.

"What do you think?" Ancel asked. Despite the Exalted's Forge, he'd be damned if he left any final decisions up to him.

"You allow distrust to cloud your judgment." Kendin gestured around them. "He has made our position invisible to prying eyes. I believe he can do what he promises. As things stand, we do not have much choice if you wish to save the ones captured."

Melancholy enveloped Ancel for the briefest of moments before he suffused the feeling. He couldn't afford to let his prejudices cause a delay, and yet a hasty decision and walking into a trap would be just as bad. He sighed. Sometimes a leader had to take risks. This was one of those times. "Do what's required. We enter either in secret or all-out attack. The end result is all that matters."

"A wise decision." Kendin raised his right hand to the air and made a fist. At the same time, his left hand elongated and plunged into the snow. "A protective ward exists all along the walls. Any touch would set it off. The drain you brought us to is unguarded. We will make it possible for your men to reach it and pass through without the water to trouble you."

Brows furrowed, Ancel tried in vain to think of a Forge strong enough to do what was needed. One that wouldn't be detected by whatever or whoever controlled the city. He gave up. "Even if you manage this, how will you be able to follow us inside?"

Foot by foot, Kendin's body shrank. "We will always be close. Ask what you need of us, and we shall give our assistance." The Svenzar continued to speak as he melded with the earth. "Have your men

follow when the steps are built." With those words, his body dissolved altogether.

Through the Forms, Ancel discerned where Kendin became one with the ground. The same occurrence repeated itself among all the Sven. Tracing the ripple left in their wake, he stared in shock as they, now a part of the earth, traveled to the cliff wall. As each one gained the icy surface, they reformed into what he could only describe as a set of stairs, joining where the other stopped. The steps continued up until they were level with the sewer.

A disturbance three times as large as the others flowed up the cliff face. It stopped, and then grew from the ice-covered surface. Edges curved out into a cylindrical shape large enough to hold a man. In moments, it joined with the drain.

Ancel cocked his head to one side. The thing was a tunnel made of stone and fit into the sewer exit, tilting slightly upward. Water gushed around the outside, some spilling from the new formation. In slow increments, the new runoff dwindled until a mere trickle escaped. However, sewage still rushed around and down the new tunnel's exterior while inside remained dry.

"I've seen lots of strange things in the past few months," Mirza said as he strode over, "and still I see something new often enough to shake my head. Never a dull moment."

"Indeed."

"Well the men are as ready as they'll ever be. Before the water starts making those stairs as slick as a dancer's oiled backside I say we do what we came here for."

"This won't be easy," Ancel said in response to Mirza's dry humor. "I fear what we'll find inside the city."

"Nothing is ever easy." Mirza's expression became grim. "Whatever awaits inside we deal with as needed."

Ancel wanted to tell his friend what he suspected, but instead he nodded. If he was right, there would be time enough for Mirza to see how bad things were and the type of treachery they would have to deal with in the future. "If it goes bad in there, get as many out as you can."

"How will I know when that is?"

"Trust me, you'll know." With his Pathfinder escort, Charra at his side, and Mirza following, Ancel headed to the front of his men.

The first step onto the platform-like stairs felt strange. He knew he was walking on living stone, on the bodies of the Sven. The sela essences that made up their life swirled from one to the next. They vibrated within him as if from his own heartbeat.

When he reached the new tunnel molded onto the cliff wall and the old algae-encrusted exit with icicles around its edges, he stopped.

The opening yawned before him. He knew the new tunnel growing from its insides was Kendin's body. The hole in front of him had to be a part of the Svenzar's mouth. *Well, you wondered if they would eat you, and now they will.* The humor eased his uncertainty. After a deep breath to clear his thoughts and the hint of fear fluttering in his belly, he strode inside.

His footsteps echoed along with those of the others following him. Similar to a Travelshaft, a soft glow lit the interior. Ancel strode forward amid the muted breaths of man and beast and the scuff of leather on stone. The tunnel angled upward. Soon, they were walking on level ground. They exited within the sewer system and into putrid air and squeaking rats. Darkness stretched ahead of them with a pinpoint to show where the passage ended.

Ancel Forged, twisting air and light to match their surroundings. "Uncover the lightstones."

"You sure? They will be a beacon if anyone looks down here," Mirza said.

"No one will see. Trust me."

After a brief pause and a sigh, Mirza said, "Well, you heard the man."

Moments later came the rustle of cloth. A soft, white glow bloomed. It lit the tunnel. The drains were much the same as he remembered, clogged with shit and other wastes. His imagination conjured ghastly images of what could be wriggling within the sewage. Disturbed by the sudden luminance, rats as big as a man's leg scurried away, squeaking their displeasure.

Convinced of the Sven's earlier claim, Ancel led his men forward. Power resonated above him in such torrents he felt he could extend his hand and touch it. The dream he experienced in the Travelshaft rose fresh in his mind. After a deep breath that he almost regretted when he swallowed the area's stench, he recalled the drainage system and its series of open spaces joined by tunnels. He set off, weaving his way by memory. The castle, main plaza, and its temples dedicated to the gods pulled at him. His captured people were there.

A brief trek filled with the stifled breathing and muffled coughs of a few brought him and his men to a passage much like the others.

"Kendin," Ancel kept his voice low, "I need you to confirm that the castle's cellars are on the opposite side of this wall. If so, make us a door."

Ancel sensed more than he saw the ripple that passed through the stone. He waited. A restless pressure almost overcame him when the wall slid apart. It was as if the stone simply peeled back.

One of his soldiers holding a torch stepped forward. Beyond was a dusty, expansive storage room, one half of it filled with barrels and

crates. Across the room was a wide set of stairs.

After he stepped through, Ancel waited for as many soldiers as could fit to crowd inside and settle down. When they noticed he watched, silence spread across the room and outside.

"I have a deep respect for all you who have come here to fight this battle even knowing you will face shadelings and worse," he said. "Make no mistake; many of you will die today. If you're wounded, there is a good chance no one will be able to save you. Your one solace is in fire, in the Streams. The same Streams that can corrupt you will also prevent what awaits you should you succumb to a darkwraith's blade or a daemon's tentacles. Remember that. Set it in your heart and mind now. If someone falls, behead them or burn them. It's the only way to ensure they don't rise again."

"What of your own people?" Leukisa's eyes were sunlit orbs that reminded Ancel of Charra's.

This was the hard part, but he hoped Mirza would understand. "If they have been turned, they too will face the same fate." Ancel met Mirza's eyes. His friend gave him a nod. Tension eased from his shoulders. "You all know your roles in this. Our jobs are to assassinate whoever leads here and to rescue those captured. In that order. If all else fails, those in command must die. Understood?" He waited from the murmurs of acknowledgment, and then turned to Leukisa. "Send word to Ordelia to commence the attack."

Even with the meager light cast by the flames, he noted the Exalted's eyebrows as they rose in surprise. The man didn't expect him to know they could communicate mentally. And he didn't. It had been a guess.

Leukisa bowed then closed his eyes. When he opened them he said, "It has begun."

As he said the words, the bells throughout Randane tolled a slow lament. The ceiling shook. Dust cascaded down.

"Give the soldiers a moment to empty from the castle," Mirza said under his breath. "Kendin, let us know when the halls are reasonably clear."

Time dragged while they waited. A roar from outside interrupted the breaths of man and beast. Deep in his Matersense with the voices flitting outside, Ancel felt power jolt and ebb. With it came dull thumps from the city's walls. The earlier resonance grew, pulling at him harder.

Part of the stones that made up the ceiling flowed downward. More than one soldier started or grasped for a weapon.

The stones grew into a Sven hanging upside down. "Master Kendin says the way is as clear as it will be." The Sven retreated. The ceiling smoothed.

Ancel drew his sword. “It is time.” Heart thumping, he headed for the stairs with Charra.

They spilled from the cellar into a wide hall. The few guards never stood a chance. Arrows and crossbow bolts struck them down before they sounded a warning.

“The six strongest Pathfinders, with me. Kendin, you also,” Ancel commanded. “Everyone else follow Mirza and the others.” He sprinted farther into the castle toward the main tower.

Guards rounded a corner ahead only to be buried by a wave that traveled under the carpet and along the walls. It knocked paintings and tapestries from their perches. Bone hackles erect, Charra loped at his side.

“Try not to Forge unless you must,” he instructed.

“Yes, sir,” the Pathfinders answered in unison. Three surged ahead while the others guarded the rear.

Oddly, they met little resistance. The enemies they encountered proved to be no more than a nuisance for the Pathfinders. Blades bloody, they gained the stairs to the tower. Outside, steel rang amid battle cries and commands.

“Kendin, is there a way for you to carry us up? I need to get to the top as fast as possible.”

The Svenzar’s massive head formed at the first landing. “Yes. Step onto me and hold onto the supports I provide.” He dissolved.

Seven poles grew from the landing. Without hesitation, Ancel strode up the steps and held onto the one closest to the middle. Charra bounded up next to him. Their faces masks of concern, the Pathfinders joined them.

“Hold tight,” Kendin’s voice called from below them and the surrounding walls.

The floor lurched forward, taking them with it. Ancel sucked in a breath. The platform they stood upon moved faster than a sprinting man, steadily gaining pace.

Guards occupied the first three landings. Miniature walls formed and crashed into them. Bodies toppled into the hollow in the middle of the winding steps.

By the time they made the next two landings, air rushed by Ancel’s face. They shot up, the balustrade and steps a blur. He squeezed his eyes shut yet still exhilaration spilled through him. If they met more soldiers he couldn’t tell. Within moments, they eased to a halt. When he opened his eyes, they were at the top, a closed door in front of them.

As they got off the platform, the bricks around the doorframe shook and fell. The door crashed outward. Sword in hand, Charra at his side along with his Pathfinder escort, Ancel strode outside onto the

battlements.

Unnaturally black, clouds covered the sky. Lighting illuminated the mass before streaking down into the city. Thunder rumbled. Up here, the cries of man and beast carried on the swirling winds. Cloak billowing, he headed toward the pull of power, and the spires that marked the temples dedicated to the gods of Streams.

The plaza was worse than he expected. Dagodin and Randane soldiers battled outside the castle. Shadelings writhed before the temples. The Sven formed a wall, the earth quaking at their feet as they prevented that seething mass any purchase. Ashishin stood with them, their Forges ripping into the enemy ranks. More than half the Sven were rubble. He could pick out numerous bodies of his own army. The clansmen and their pets fought in groups among wraithwolves and darkwraiths, their savagery giving the shadelings pause.

Daemons and darkwraiths screeched. Black tentacles whipped out to strike down any of his men within range. Darkwraiths struck in blurs, their swords swift and deadly. Black lightning streaked sideways toward his forces.

Leukisa was repelling them with shields of his own, Forging faster than Ancel once thought possible. His skill kept them from being overwhelmed.

A bellow tore the air. The cobbles swelled and blasted up. Kendin's form exploded through the opening. The shower of rubble became one with his body. Arms outstretched, he threw stones as big as a man into the shadeling ranks. The enemy lines buckled. When he stomped, a circular wave swept out from his feet. Any creature it touched, it entombed.

The power Ancel had been feeling spiked. He snapped his head around.

Atop the temple's steps, next to the statues of Ilumni, Amuni, Bragni, and Rituni, a woman in leather armor was dragging Kachien's limp form by her hair. He recognized her.

Jillian.

Once he'd learned of Irmina's skill, he'd suspected someone had controlled the wolves that day in the Greenleaf, but until Jillian went missing he hadn't been certain who the person could have been. He snarled.

A man in black armor had his hands outstretched. Shade essences billowed from him, consuming several Eldanhill folk. The Mater coalesced into thicker bands, growing stronger from some connection within the temples. Ancel could never forget the feel of those Forgings. They were the same as those the night his mother was taken. Darkness did not shroud the man's face this time.

Rage seethed inside Ancel until his vision filmed red. The man was Mensa, Mother's head servant.

The voices outside the Eye screamed. Sword in hand, he leaped from the tower wall.

Chapter 51

Ryne stood where the Great Divide's black chasm began, not far from the towering edifices of the Sanctums of Shelter. The spires rose at his flanks, their tops hidden in the clouds. This close to them he felt the various essences at use throughout Granadia and near any Bastion. It was like stepping in front a blacksmith's bellows then being thrust onto a mountain top in the dead of winter. He didn't need to link with Ancel to identify the young man's Forgings. They burned through him almost as if he was standing next to his ward.

Denestia's Mater was somewhat odd here, concentrated. The elements whipped and coiled more violent than the worst of winter storms, their colors prismatic. The air gave off a melange of smells that made him want to retch and savor them at the same time. Bloated clouds bubbled overhead. This location being the point where Denestia's power touched the Prima unleashed first by himself and then Ancel, the occurrence did not quite surprise him, but it was no less troubling. Although the elements from both types of Mater thrived, they were at odds with each other, like two siblings who believed each was the more dominant and thus needed to fight.

"Are you sure it was wise to let the boy face a Skadwaz on his own?" Taeria's voice, or rather, Trucida Adler's, was a raspy whisper. Appearing frailer than before despite her robes, skin splotched, she hunched beside him. Discovering she kept an eye on him in Carnas had been a welcome comfort.

"It takes the heat of battle to develop the best crafted weapons."

"What if he loses himself?"

"Then we will have to kill him and start anew."

"Let's hope he passes then," she said tiredly. "From what I sense, he might be able to best a few of us even if we're linked."

"Indeed."

Power surged again from Randane and the Iluminus. He frowned at that last.

His cloak flapped from a sudden gust. As the wind grew, the material streamed out behind him. Snow swirled like white petals. Rain pattered, first a few drops, then a torrential downpour. He raised a hand, drawing on an Etching. A shield of pure shade, yet still transparent, formed a dome around him and Taeria. It served two purposes.

"They come. Cocky as ever," she said.

He smiled. "Just the way I like them."

Through the rain and from the Great Divide's edge strode three forms. They stopped within shouting distance. As abruptly as it began,

the storm died.

"Yow two were always full of yourselves," Ryne called, "even after Cardia and Astoca split."

"We didn't come here for insults," Lestere Cadem replied, voice carrying without raising it. Ryne expected no less from the air guardian. Dressed in a blue coat with matching britches, face hard and angular, Lestere kept a hand close to his sword.

"Just to accept your surrender," added Henden. A pillar of water coiled around the graying man like a giant snake.

"What makes you think that's what I'm here for?"

"Because," Lestere stepped aside to let the third man through, "two Eztezians might be a stalemate, but with a netherling on our side, one you attacked, you have no hope of winning. Especially now that the guardian of cold has abandoned your cause."

Sakari took his place between them. Face expressionless as always, he dipped his head.

"Besides," Henden opened his arms, palms upward, "we see you've already given up the light. You definitely have no chance." He cocked his head as his attention shifted to Taeria. "I've never known who metal was, but I once thought it would be a Svenzar rather than a human."

"Maybe, I don't stand a chance," Ryne said, ignoring the comment about Tae, "and maybe I do. Don't forget I can sense that you two have also relinquished your essences to another." Ryne knew that didn't matter. Even as a shell of their former selves, Taeria posed no threat to them. Not when they could still summon Prima constructs. He might be able to defeat one but not both.

"False bravado as always, Thanairen," Henden said.

"You can tell your master I don't accept any of his terms."

"Then we shall have to kill you and take your ward as we did his sister." A wicked grin spread across Lestere's face. "You need to die anyway for them to return."

Ryne smiled to match, and then he grew serious. "It should have never come to this. We were to nurture the Aegae, not turn them against each other."

Henden spat. "Why not? Why should they live to rule, live with power, while we succumb to madness? Because of prophecy? We chose the smart route. Let them fight the gods when they rise, and we survive to reap the rewards. Self-serving? Yes, but not much different from what you do."

"No. I serve the Annendin's will."

"The Annendin?" Lestere scoffed. "A so-called god no one has ever seen. At least we can say we've met Amuni and the others, but this Annendin? Even the other gods do not admit to its existence. If it

did live, it's dead now or doesn't care. That's the only explanation as to why it would abandon Denestia."

"Funny," Ryne gave a deliberate shake of his head, "you don't believe yet you created an Aegis."

"No, we created someone to fight for us with power we could not wield." Henden gestured to his own Etchings. "Tell me, Thanairen, don't you grow weary of staving off the madness? Of wondering when it is death will come to take you? And for what? A people who know only treachery, destruction, pain, and suffering."

"I wonder who taught them all that," Ryne said. "We've only been misleading them into wars for the last few thousand years."

Lestere shrugged. "Sheep are meant to be slaughtered."

Ryne saw there was no way to sway his brethren. The realization saddened him. "You're right. You allowed Kahkon to twist your minds away from your mandates. In this case, that makes you sheep."

The two Eztezians reacted simultaneously. Their Etchings glowed, lighting up their skin and armor. Prima Materium roared from them. It spun in a mass, forming a roaring vortex filled with air and water. Stormy winds sucked at Ryne with such force that if he wasn't held in place within the ground's Forms, it would have swallowed him.

Despite the swiftness of their reactions, Lestere and Henden were too late. And too weak. They'd been too confident in their own power, and their assumptions about Taeria had been wrong. The second purpose of his shaded shield was to hide that she was only an Exalted.

Miniscule pieces of metal coalesced within the air and water currents the two men wielded. The shards shot straight down, thousands upon thousands of them, a rain of metallic death created by Kalvor, the Svenzar king, upon whom they stood.

Working in concert, the men Forged air and water into a nebulous container around them to slow Kalvor's attacks. The earth, sprinkled with metal, flowed up to encase their feet. Not reacting, Sakari remained untouched.

At the same time, Ryne drew on the power within the Sanctums behind him. And also from the Great Divide. After all, it was home. His home. He'd have to be fast to prevent them from summoning their sentients. The Prima he expected from the Divide failed him, dissipating as someone else wrenched it from his grasp.

Ryne gasped. Such a feat should have been impossible. His heart sped up, beating in chaotic thumps that felt as if it would leap from his chest. Fear threatened to choke him despite his submersion within the Shunyata. Denestia's essences screamed in his head. It took everything for him to beat them back, to find a room in the prison of his mind to lock his emotions away. Having to resort to such desperation stilled the blood in his veins. For Denestia's Mater to have

risen despite his connection to his Etchings and Prima should never have happened. They weren't strong enough.

Laughter echoed. A solid bar of shade shot up from the chasm. It arced high in the air and then fell. When it crashed to the ground outside the torrent of Prima and the two Eztezians as they staved off Kalvor's attack, it resolved into black flames. The fire danced and capered before eyes appeared followed by hands, feet, and finally a male torso. As the Mater subsided, the essences formed into material akin to living cloth. Writhing and twisting with a sentience of its own, the fabric settled around the man. Ryne knew better than to think it was something as simple as cloth. It was another type of netherling, this one more of a parasite not unlike a leech.

The netherling and the man's outfit became one. In an immaculate gray coat adorned with silver scrollwork and pants to match, he was similar in height to Ryne. The way the width of his shoulders and back tapered down to his waist spoke of a physical specimen in prime shape. His black boots were highly polished with circular silver clasps on the side. A silver belt to match encircled his waist, the buckle of which was the shape of a maned beast. The same creature stood out on the shiny buttons of the coat. Etchings adorned the sword hilt that jutted from the scabbard at his waist. One hand on his weapon, the man stepped forward. The last of the shade shrouding his features disappeared. His hair ruffled with a life of its own.

Ryne tensed. His recognition was threefold. Familiar auras spilled from the man. The manner in which the newcomer and the creature residing within him had Forged were unmistakable. The memory of the battle against the one who'd created the Wraithwoods in Ostania rose fresh in his mind. Other recollections followed, most of them so painful Ryne wanted to squeeze his eyes shut. The man before him was not the child he'd portrayed all those years in Carnas, but the similarity of his face was unmistakable, the angular shape with eyes that often appeared to be squinting.

All the memories, the time spent; the stories he would read to Kahkon in the Skadwaz's guise as a needy young boy who craved knowledge; the attachment he built; the promise he'd made to the boy's mother when the lapra took him; the battle he and Sakari had fought that night to free Kahkon. It all came roaring back.

For him to discover this deception.

Ryne shook, his hand clenched tight around his sword hilt, and unlike before, he did not attempt to deny his emotions. He let the rage remain unbridled, drank it in, and fed it to his Etchings. They burned like magma, their glow bursting forth.

A grin split Kahkon's features. With a confident swagger in his step, he strolled toward where Kalvor still tried to overwhelm the

other two Eztezians.

"Now," Ryne whispered.

When Sakari's sword took Lestere's and Henden's heads, Ryne doubted they felt a thing. They never saw it coming.

Ryne pulled on light essences and Shimmered to Kahkon. With the Skadwaz holding the Great Divide's power, he doubted he could hurt him with any Forge. Instead, he drew his sword, activated the Etchings along the blade, and struck.

Kahkon's hair extended in a billowing mass to block the blow. Several tentacles snaked their way past Ryne's sword as the netherling etched into Kahkon's body responded.

Ryne summoned Damal, who appeared in a swath of light. The tentacles slammed into the construct, the impact throwing Ryne back through the air. In midflight, he Shimmered again, this time appearing above Kahkon and dropping with his sword pointed down.

As he expected, Kahkon attempted to dodge using Earthtouch. But Kalvor was already in place within the ground. The earth belonged to the Svenzar. Kahkon could no more manipulate the essences there than he could wield the Flows.

However, there was nothing stopping Kahkon from Blurring away. Yet, something about the way he moved was off. Frowning, Ryne studied him. Before Ryne could shout a warning, a gigantic metal arm surged up from the ground and snatched Kahkon's form in midflight.

A wail pierced the air from the opposite direction.

Ryne spun to face where he'd last seen Sakari and the two dead Eztezians. Numerous tentacles flowed from Sakari's chitinous body. Head arched back, the screech continued to pour from his mouth. Next to him, sword in hand, was the real Kahkon. Etchings glowed along the blade's length, the only weapon that could kill a netherling outside of a god's attack or one of their own.

"You took my servants," Kahkon said. "Now, I take yours and the Great Divide also."

A whisper from Sakari brushed Ryne's mind. "I am sorry I was not able to warn you of him, master. At least I saw you home safely. He has your ward's mother and has used her to free much of the shadelings from their prisons. An army of them await at the entrance to the Vallum near the Iluminus. Beware his strength. He is using the Great Divide's Mater to feed the vasumbrals. They are almost ready. Also, not only does he have a netherling's power imbued into him by Amuni, but he has also stolen the minor essences from several Eztezians.

"You would have been his greatest triumph. My death was the only way to ensure you were free of his control and any chance to

corrupt your thoughts. I wish I could have done more." Ryne sensed the hint of a smile. "Playing both the shade and the Nine against each other has been an enjoyable charade. Of all things, to fail you now." Sakari's voice ended in an escaping breath and regret. His body began to dissipate, chitin becoming ash that the wind swept away.

Brimming with hate, Ryne focused on Kahkon. At his back, the Sanctums roared with Denestia's Mater and the Prima they had gathered over the years. Using his sword, the Sanctums' Access Key, he tapped into that powerful fount.

Chapter 52

Suspended in the air within the zyphyl, Irmina was one with its mind. Inside the creature was the same polished silver surface as outside. Her body turned in revolutions as the zyphyl's visions streamed out before her. How the creatures managed to live with such nightmares, most of them not theirs, constantly in their heads, crowding their psyche, was unfathomable to her. Such an occurrence would have driven her insane long ago. She couldn't decipher what it was the zyphyl saw nor did she want to. What she knew was what she felt.

Pain.

The zyphyls suffered. They saw the world's futures; they lived in agony for that gift. Or curse. The latter was how most of the creatures considered their ability. The reason the idea of freedom filled their dreams.

Irmina didn't attempt to speak to the creature. She kept to the periphery of its consciousness, searching for a way to give it some relief. Try as she might, she could find no way to sever its connection to whatever threads allowed it to see what it did. The zyphyl had to be connected to all the Planes of Existence, but exactly how was as baffling to her as discerning which vision would come to pass.

Whatever she needed to free the creature, she knew she had little time left to find the answer. Within the zyphyl the futures ripped asunder by the netherling who was massacring the Gray Council's army brought tremor after tremor rippling through the creature's body and mind. Visions flitted by as Matii, most likely deep in the Eye, threw Forging after Forging at the netherling. All to no avail.

Frowning, she watched the battle. Deep inside, her mind whispered that the answer lay in plain sight. All she had to do was understand.

A fireball barrage left a wavy trail through the air, lightning streaked sideways, the earth heaved and pitched, mounds of rubble formed a spear of steel and stone, all directed at the netherling. Irmina concentrated, ignoring the way the netherling deflected the attacks with as much concern as a warrior slapping away a fly. Instead, she focused on the serene expressions of the Matii. Faced with imminent death, they showed no overwhelming reactions. Even the ones with blood dripping from various wounds.

Sudden realization made her gasp. The Eye. Of course. Why hadn't she thought of it before?

Bracing herself against the rush she'd experience from the emotional storm, she thrust herself into the dreams enveloping the

zyphyl. The results left her breathless. She herself had to find the Eye to shut them out before they overwhelmed her. It had the intended effect.

The zyphyl took note.

She sensed it searching to find an identical void within itself. A prod to its emotional center sent its consciousness where she wanted. A moment later, she took her time and made a deliberate show of embracing the Eye, blocking out external effects.

Now, she waited.

The response didn't take long. It came in the form of a shudder through the zyphyl's silvery body, quickly followed by what she could only call a contented sigh.

A mind wormed its way to meet hers. As usual, when she attempted to master a beast, the communication wasn't in the form of words. It was more a sense of what the contact meant by feelings. The mind conveyed gratitude and pleasure. Then came what she'd hoped for.

The zyphyl wanted to know how it could repay her. Irmna smiled.

She conjured an image of the netherling. With a whine, the zyphyl passed on its recognition. Irmina detached from its mind, easing back into her own.

When she opened her eyes she immediately sought the Forge that kept the zyphyl locked within the Travelshaft. It was a mixture of light, air, and earth to form shackles. When she broke them, she didn't see the monolithic silvery mass move. One moment it was there, the next, it disappeared.

Galiana looked on in awe while the zyphyl coiled around the netherling like some gigantic, silver serpent. Energy crackled in pure, white concentrations along its length. Miniature lightning bolts encircled its girth. It had no appendages, and no mouth, only one eye in its bulbous head, but somehow it was inflicting damage. Dark, viscous liquid dribbled from the netherling's many wounds.

The armies previously engaged in the plaza were now engrossed in this struggle. A few still fought in small pockets. However, in several areas, the Tribunal's forces were reorganizing. If her people were going to escape through the Vallum, they needed to leave now while Irmina had bought them some time.

"Cantor," she called.

The High Shin joined her.

"Gather as many of ours as you can. Dispatch Pathfinders to those of Irmina's forces still standing. The entrance through the Vallum lies behind us, past the Travelshaft."

The man nodded and set to work.

Jerem, his clothes sooty, eyes tired, shuffled over to her side. “I have already instructed Halvor to stop the Travelshaft’s effects so we can pass.” He nodded toward the neat lines of Tribunal soldiers that were forming. “He said he will have his Sven hold them off for as long as possible.”

“They will need help,” Galiana said.

“Yes, but-”

“We have come too far, Jerem. This is the beginning of what we lived for. We knew the day would come when one of us needed to sacrifice. The time is not yours. Ancel will need you when he visits the Broken Lands.” An ache throbbed in her chest. She smiled sadly. “I consider this an honor.”

A tear trickled down the old man’s face. “If this were any other time or position, I would drag you by the scruff of your neck, but-”

She placed a finger on his lips. “It’s fine. I want you to tell Thanairen I forgive him for his betrayal. I understand how necessary his path was now.”

A long, keening wail shattered all other sound. Mouth open, she glanced toward where the two creatures battled in midair. The zyphyl’s form was turning to a dull gray, its electrical charges sputtering. It still fought.

“Go now,” she whispered. “I will give you the time you require.” She strode forward before she finished her words.

Ancel fought desperately against Mensa. The man moved more like oily smoke than a human. He spun, dodged, and parried at the perfect moments, either avoiding or deflecting his every blow. Leaping up and down the temple’s wide marble stairs, they sought any advantage. A serene smile graced Mensa’s lips.

The city burned, its heat scorching Ancel’s back. Corpses littered the ground, most of them the remnants of Eldanhill’s folk. From time to time, the dead shuddered and then stood before charging off to fight the living. With each resurrection, Mensa’s grin widened.

Close by, Mirza and Kachien fought Jillian. Charra’s roars echoed over the other sounds of battle. Ancel could not tell how they fared. All his focus needed to be on Mensa. The slices and cuts on his arms and abdomen and his swollen eye from a kick taught him the folly of any lapse in concentration.

Not once did Mensa speak, but his movements were a far cry from the disheveled servant he had played. Whenever Ancel landed a blow, blackness coiled around the wound, healing it in seconds. At those times, the man actually cackled in glee.

Ancel delved into every attack he could muster. His Stances and Styles changed more swiftly than at any other time when he sparred

against Ryne. Their intricacies came to him, as deep inside the Eye, he fed his emotions to his sword work. Their battle became a dance to the music of ringing steel.

His love for his people mixed with his hate for Mensa, adding to his speed, yet providing him with moves so stealthy he was sure Mensa never saw them coming. This, he combined with the frenzy the winds brought, attacking in every direction, while infusing it with the energy of fire. The sword responded, its blade black and red at the same time, sweeping and licking in half a dozen slices, feints, and arcs.

Mensa dodged or parried them all.

Ancel whipped forward, carried on threads of air, trying to predict Mensa's next attack or defense. When Mensa's sword swept in, Ancel infused the determination and strength of the earth into his parrying blow. The blades crashed together. A wave of earth rumbled under their feet. Standing on air, neither of them felt its effects.

Stance after Stance, Ancel unleashed. His Waterweave, flowing in swirls and rushes to match a waterfall, met Mensa's Shadowstalk, the man disappearing to reappear at Ancel's flank. Voidwalk, which relied on the air he stood upon, glided Ancel away from the killing blow, momentum thrusting him across the cobbles.

As exhilarating as the battle had become, Ancel knew it could not last. At least not for him. His legs and chest burned. The weight of his sword bore down on his arms. His breaths were becoming labored.

Mensa chose that moment for all out attack. He flitted in, his earlier speed nothing more than a slow glide. Ancel snatched for the Etchings on his forearm as he brought his hand up, making a solid shield of pure Forms. Mensa's sword stopped just before it connected.

Ancel never saw the foot that slammed into his chest. Blown back, he crashed into a pillar. Dust rained down.

"You're almost as good as your master," Mensa sauntered toward him, "and much better than your father, but you cannot hope to defeat me. You haven't the power." He threw his hands up.

Shade shot through the air from the temple and from other points within the city. The essence roared into Mensa. His body expanded, legs and arms growing thicker, more muscular.

Auras spilled about the man. Ancel strained his eyes to take them in. Had he just seen reflections of Mensa within the auras? He peered closely as Mensa stood absorbing more essences. There, he saw them now, multiple images of the man and tentacles. Deep in his Matersense, he also saw where Mensa's power originated.

One of the pillars hummed. Ancel frowned at its familiarity.

Distracted, he didn't see Mensa move. The flat of the Skadwaz's blade took him in the ribs. Ancel felt something crunch. He cried out

in pain.

"Your mother thought she could best me also." The sword in Mensa's fist glowed black, dark fire spilling from its Etchings. "As did many who were linked with netherlings. Yet, us humans have a propensity for growth that most, if not all other races, lack."

Mensa drew in more Mater. His body swelled rapidly. It did not only grow in height but in girth, until he towered at least twenty feet into the sky. Dark mists congealed all around him. He laughed, the sound pealing like a great bell.

A burst of Mater resonated from the far north.

"Ah, my master is the process of killing yours it seems."

A voice whispered in Ancel's head. Ryne's voice. "I gave you my light. Now, I give you the world's light. Kill this fucking idiot, destroy the Chainin he is using, and at the same time you will have helped me and the others."

Light and heat essences to rival the sun coruscated in the clouds above, igniting them like a flaming sunset. They glowed so brightly Ancel threw his hand up to shield his eyes.

Pure, unadulterated Prima.

Mensa cried out.

Without thought, Ancel reached into the power spilling from Mensa. He allowed it to flow over him, accepted it into himself. He fought his way through its clinging filth to its origin.

The Chainin was within the pillar he felt vibrating.

The voices from Denestia's essences gibbered and raged. Ancel fed them to the Prima within his Etchings. His body burned.

Light to balance shade. Light to show honor. Honor to show mercy.

The temple's roof exploded. The Chainin shattered. Prima Mateirum shot into the sky. From both himself and from whatever source Ryne used far to the north.

Flames whiter than bleached bones, whiter than pure snow, whiter than the spots that danced before his eyes, burst from the temple.

Etien strode from the conflagration, his size to match Mensa. He pointed his glowing sword. "Vile creature, a melding of netherling and man such as yourself is an abomination."

The words also came from Ancel. After all, he and Etien were one and the same. They were the Battlegaurd.

When he swiped his sword, Etien repeated the stroke. Mensa brought up his blade to block. Ancel's weapons sheared through the Skadwaz's like a knife through paper. A rain of black blood fell.

Through the power pouring from the Sanctums of Shelter, Ancel sought those of his people who still lived within Randane. Those who a mending could save, and one he prayed for a chance to find help.

Drawing on Etien's knowledge, he Materialized the survivors to where he sensed Irmina's pull at the Iluminus.

The rest of Randane, he burned.

Chapter 53

Connected to the Sanctums, Ryne could tell when Ancel departed Randane. Mater surged from the Iluminus where a netherling battled a human with at least as much power as an Exalted. For now, the human was holding his own behind a Forging that drew on the essences imbued into the Iluminus itself. However, they could not maintain it for a long. If the madness didn't take them first, they would deplete their sela essences and die.

With the Prima released by Ancel, he'd called up reserves to shut away Kahkon and the Great Divide from any immediate access. He made out the Skadwaz raging on the other side of the barrier he'd erected. Depleted of some of his power when Ancel destroyed the Chainin, thus breaking the link to the shade he had been tapping into, Kahkon could do nothing more. Any attacks would have to be more direct, through systematic destruction of each Bastion. A feat still beyond the shade.

It had been through sheer desperation that Ryne had given the Sanctums light to Ancel, but there was no other way for him to keep Kahkon at bay. Not with the way the Skadwaz had wrenched shade from him. He knew within himself if he'd attempted to summon his other sentient, he would have failed.

Yet, all he'd done was to give the world a temporary reprieve. In all likelihood, Kahkon would consolidate his strength with the resources provided by the Great Divide. That didn't even bring into account that he possessed the vasumbrals.

Then there was still the Nine. The netherling in the Iluminus had to be one of them.

A shift in the essences made him focus on the gate through the Vallum of Light at the Iluminus. One of Kahkon's traps was there. A massive shadeling army stationed outside, ready for any breach. The Setian remnants would be opening that gate at any moment. He allowed himself a smile.

With squeeze of his hand, he called on the heat stored within the Vallum.

Kachien was dying. For all his power, Ancel could do nothing about it. Tears streamed from his eyes.

The survivors formed a convoy heading toward the Cogal Drin Mountains and the city of Benez somewhere on the other side of those peaks. Behind them, the Vallum of Light lit up the sky. A field swathed in black marked where Ryne had destroyed thousands of shadelings at the Vallum's gate.

The trap suggested that either he had more traitors among his people, or it was a coincidence. He no longer believed in coincidences. Galiana would have liked that. More tears dribbled down his cheeks. She had died holding off the Tribunal's Matii as well as a netherling within the Iluminus. *May Ilumni keep your soul safe.* For the briefest of moments, disorientation took him. If not for a heart heavy with grief, he would have smiled.

"Don't shed tears for me," Kachien said, her voice raspy. "I died well. Fighting. An Alzari could ask for nothing more." Black veins were appearing along her skin. "Finish me."

Wiping at his face, Ancel eased his other hand from hers. He lacked the will to speak, so he mouthed, "I'm sorry." He stood.

In one motion, he unsheathed his sword, triggered its Etchings, and took her head. With his other hand, he Forged fire to consume the body. Heat scoured his face, but he did not turn away. He watched until it went out. When it did, he drew on the wind and scattered the ashes.

A hand on his shoulder made him turn. Mirza nodded to him, his eyes red and puffy. Irmina stood near, her wary gaze centered on Ryne. Halvor and Kendin's monolithic forms matched the sands upon which they stood. Jerem had left to seek some alliance with the Cardians and Astocans, or at least to plead for one.

"Walk with me, Ryne." As they strode across the dunes, Ancel asked, "What happened? I felt you losing."

"The thing you fought, the Skadwaz, are more powerful than I once thought. They have formed some coupling with netherlings to grant them more strength. We knew Amuni was experimenting with something of the sort, but we thought it was never completed."

"You were wrong."

Ryne nodded.

"What does this mean?"

"We need Prima to defeat them, as we do to stop the Nine. As of now, I used the Sanctums of Shelter to trap Kahkon at the Great Divide. At least one of the Nine is free, locked in the Iluminus for now by use of the Bastions within it. I would not wager against there being more of them. Before you can hope to face them, you must complete your training. You need all of the Streams."

"How do I attain the others?"

"The guardian of heat resides within the Broken Lands. The one who guards cold is far north in Everland. You must gain them both before I can give you my shade."

Ancel stopped in his tracks. "You held both light and shade?"

"Yes, I once thought I was supposed to be the Aegis. However, Kahkon, the one I fought at the Sanctums, now possesses a great deal

of what was once mine. He tricked me into seizing my power. Now, he rules the Great Divide. I am certain he is releasing everything we guardians once imprisoned there."

"How do we deal with him?"

"You don't. Your brother will keep him at bay for now. With the second Chainin broken, three Eztezians dead, only six seals remain. Mine, Kalvor's, the other two guardians, and two Chainin. The gods' return is near unavoidable."

Ancel frowned. Much of what Ryne had said he barely heard. One word dominated his mind. "My brother? I have no brothers."

"Actually, you do. A brother and sister. Anton and Celina. No, they aren't dead. They are what complete the Aegis."

Ancel's pendant vibrated harder than he ever remembered.

Mother.